

## Full Circle by Lborealis

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Aged-Up Character(s), Angst and Feels, Canon Divergence Post Season 2, F/M, Hacker!Mike, Its 1993 queue the Duran Duran, Punk!Eleven, Reunion, Sexual (non smutty) interactions, Teaming up to end Brenner once and for all, drama plus romance plus adventure plus fluff, future!fic

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Kali Prasad, Mike Wheeler, Original Characters, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Eleven/Mike Wheeler

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2017-12-16

**Updated:** 2018-07-15

**Packaged:** 2022-04-22 05:13:30

**Rating:** Mature

**Warnings:** Graphic Depictions Of Violence

**Chapters:** 23

**Words:** 131,776

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

"If you got a second chance, no matter how crazy the circumstances, would you take it?"

"Yes"

"Me too"

At 16, Mike and El were torn from each other as El went into hiding from a resurgence of Brenner's project. Seven years later, Mike had finally moved on. But a chance occurrence on a New York City train throws them together again at the best and worst possible moment, completely changing their trajectories.

Complete!

# 1. Chapter 1

*Please don't do this, El. Please!*

*You're not safe as long as I'm here. I'm not safe as long as I'm here.*

*I know but I lo-... Eleven... Just... FUCK! Just...*

*I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.*

*Promise you'll find me when you're safe. Promise me.*

*I Promise.*

*Eleven, I -*

*Mike...*

"Mike!"

"Wha?!"

Mike shot up in bed, his heart racing.

Marissa sighed. "You were having that dream again."

"What?" Mike asked. He cringed at her moan of sleepy annoyance as he rubbed his hands over his eyes and blindly reached for his glass of water in the dark.

"Eleven. You yelled Eleven. Again. It's like the third time in a row. What does it mean?" she slurred sleepily as she buried her face back into her pillow.

Mike laid back restlessly against his pillow. "Yeah, I... I don't know."

"Weird..." Marissa murmured.

Mike laid in silence. A cold sweat clung to his skin. He willed his eyes to focus blankly on the streetlights that painted the concrete ceiling as he let his body calm. The cars six stories below drifted up in white noise through his window. He could not catch his breath.

After a while, once Marissa's breathing returned to a steady cadence of sleep, he curled into a ball on his side and pulled away from her. Her breath tickled the bare skin of his back, but it only worked to make him colder. He bundled the blankets beneath his chin and watched the slowly flashing blue light that emanated from his computer on the other end of the warehouse loft.

It eventually worked to bleach the memory of her face from his mind, and lulled him back to sleep.

The morning came quickly.

Before he knew it, he found himself bleary eyed in front of his computer screen.

"Up so early?" Marissa cooed into his ear as she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek. An errant strand of her brown hair fell against him and tickled his ear.

He fought himself not to shake her off, as had been his reflex. It was just that he needed all of the concentration he could muster. "Yeah, sorry if I woke you," he murmured as his eyes remained glued to the screen. "I got paged about an operation and I really need to pay attention."

"It's like you have a new operation every day," she grumbled as she crossed back to the bed and reached for her skirt on the floor.

"...I do have a new operation every day," Mike replied simply.

Marissa didn't mask her tone as she replied. "And how legal is today's operation?"

Mike failed to bite back his sigh. "It's not something for you to worry \_ "

"- I'm just worried about you, okay?" she cut in defensively. "Have you given any more thought to meeting up with that contact of your Dad's? It might be good to maybe find something stable, and not -"

"- I'm meeting him today," Mike interjected quickly, as plainly as he could, through his gritted teeth.

"Oh, really?" she asked, her tone instantly lighter. "That's great!"

"Yeah...great," Mike replied as he attempted to glue his eyes back to his computer screen. He failed as her footsteps neared him. He could sense her standing directly behind him as he worked.

"I, um..." He stuttered, suddenly self conscious. He threw an apologetic smile over his shoulder. "Sorry I got caught in this. I know we'd planned on getting breakfast. It's just - "

"- It's fine," she said, though he could swear he saw her eyes roll as she reached down to pick up her bag. "I was just...? Um... Did you still want to come with me this weekend?"

"What's this weekend?" he asked.

"It's... Christmas. Christmas?" she reiterated, her voice a bit dumbstruck by his question. "You know... meeting my family? Do you remember?"

"Uh... Oh yeah! Um... Yeah. Of course," Mike replied as he turned back to her.

"Oh, great," she said with a smile. She brushed her fingers through her short brown hair and smoothed it to the side with the remnants of yesterday's product as she filled him in on the details he had, admittedly, forgotten about.

He missed half of her words as he watched her talk and his mind ran away from him. He tried to see it yet again, what Dustin had noticed, but he couldn't. She didn't look like... like *her*... at all. No matter how many times Dustin had repeated it when he'd visited a few weeks back.

"- and I'm supposed to talk to my Mom today, so I'll page you when I have the final details and you can call me?"

"Uh, yeah. Sounds good," Mike stuttered as he turned back once again to his computer screen.

"Okay..." she said tentatively as she leaned down and kissed his cheek goodbye. "I hope the meeting goes well!"

"You too," Mike mumbled distractedly, fully back in the swing of staring at the code without a moment's hesitation.

The door opened and closed quietly. And upon the *click* of the door latch, his head immediately dropped to his desk.

"Shit."

He had to get himself under control.

He could hardly even hear Marissa over the swirl in his head.

What was happening to him?

It had been years since he'd dreamed about her regularly. Yet, out of the blue, she had begun to appear from the deepest corners of his mind. She'd filled his dreams without end for every night of the last two weeks.

Her mop of curls and shy smile had puffed up like smoke out of foggy memories at first. As the nights had progressed, however, the details of her face, long faded, had filled out and bloomed into a vivid Technicolor.

At this point, her face felt etched on the backs of his eyelids. She was no longer just haunting his sleep. She was haunting him right this moment as he stared at the computer screen.

He almost felt like he could smell her again.

To be honest, it was maddening.

It was destabilizing and it felt so very out of place. For, it had been over a year since he had finally convinced himself to move on.

He hadn't held it against himself in those first years, the waiting.

Back at home, they had refused to give up hope. They had searched for her throughout the years, almost without end, through Hopper's connections and Mike's growing skills.

Waiting for her was simply natural in that first year. Necessary, even.

A committed and hopeful no brainer decision. It became nerve wracking in the second year as his expectations for her return melted into a lost sense of confusion.

Years three and four had devolved into a maddening rollercoaster of emotions; a constant pull between forced hope and the specter of dark and heartbreaking acceptance that something... he could never allow himself to think of *what...* had happened.

Throughout those years he'd luckily had the distraction of college. Yet, MIT and Boston were not enough to change the constant cycle of his thoughts, or the steadfast sense of commitment that he had still desperately clung to. Over the years, it became public knowledge around the MIT campus that Mike Wheeler didn't date. He got teased about it constantly, but he never really said much in reply. It was too hard to explain, and even harder to push past.

He just... couldn't give up hope. No matter how hard he tried. She had promised that she would come back for him, and she'd always kept her promises before...

However, time and age did have a way of fading past priorities... or rather, it had a way of forcing acceptance for the things he could not change. Around Day 1,800, shortly after he found evidence of the Philadelphia incident that had proved she was alive and free, it finally sank in.

For some reason... she had chosen not to come back.

It was a heartbreaking sensation, but with it, something new had opened up within him. It was an acceptance of sorts. Cold and depressing. Yet necessary.

It was time.

He met Marissa about a year after that.

She was a cute nerdy brain with a publishing internship in midtown Manhattan. They'd met through a mutual friend five days after Mike had arrived in New York. They had instantly clicked over the sensation of freedom they both felt from the confines of college, and

their curiosity for the foreign new city they had both just begun to call home. She was witty, intelligent, decently nerdy and very cute. She had a dimple on her right cheek that drove him wild.

It had been the best summer he'd had since he was a teenager.

Yet, the fall had brought with it a slight turn. A slight tension that had grown and veered darker as the months had progressed. There was a little less light in her eyes. A little more point to her tone. Mike felt a little less excited, a little more defensive, and a lot more evasive as she attempted to bore deeper beneath his surface.

"It's just the end of the honeymoon phase," Nancy had offered when he'd reached out, nervous and confused, for advice after a particularly nasty fight about how 'closed off' he was. "It usually happens about this far in."

Mike could have handled 'the end of the honeymoon phase.' In fact, he had handled it...

That was, until the dreams started...

They were too much. Too heavy. Too deep. Each night it felt like a drill was angling through his brain and spraying memories of El Hopper in every direction without fail. More than anything else, it made him feel incredibly guilty...because the memory of her was burning his skin hot with a renewed longing that he couldn't find the ability to control.

It wasn't the work that was causing it. He had always been able to compartmentalize that, and he wasn't willing to stop due to a few dreams. It was too important.

This was something else.

Subconscious self sabotage? PTSD? A brain hemorrhage?

Whatever it was, he had to get it under control.

Mike sighed harshly and tried to shake free of his thoughts. He stood up and crossed to the oversized and ancient warehouse window. Using both arms, he laboriously cracked one of the huge windows to

get a breath of fresh air. Hell's Kitchen was alive below. Traffic was backed up on 12th Avenue below. Boats buzzed in and out of the docks on the Hudson.

It was a unique living situation, to say the least, but the appeal of living in a hacker community and operating out of a completely secure building was something he couldn't pass up. The place was Fort Knox as far as the technology protocols went. It was safer to work on his work here than he could have dreamed. It allowed him a full ability to focus what he needed to complete. In return, all they asked of him was a few hours each morning to do the 'legally dubious' hacking they needed from him.

He was so close to completing finally completing it for her.

If only he could find a way to tell her.

Mike's gaze fell upon his old Supercomm. It was propped up, at the ready, on an overturned box turned nightstand by his bed.

Ready for *what*, however, he couldn't say, because..."Pull it together, Wheeler. She's not going to be listening on that fucking radio. She's not 13. *You're* not 13."

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Jane sat in the large windowsill of the dilapidated warehouse as she absentmindedly toyed with her necklace. The FM radio from her Walkman played softly through her thin foam headphones. The poppy tunes laid out a perfect soundtrack for the boats as they zipped up and down the Hudson River.

The city was always busy in the morning, even in the water. Despite the realities that surrounded her life, a small smile played upon her lips. New York was a foreign place, just like all of the others, but it felt oddly welcoming. After all of the anonymous cities and backwoods cabins, after any and every place that had served as a good hiding spot over the many years, she had prepared herself for New York to feel hostile. Every place felt hostile.

Maybe it was the energy, but something here felt different. Voices in the city went every which way. They filled the air with a consistent



and anonymous intensity. It was a sensation that made her feel, for the first time in so long, that she could simply blend in. It calmed her. It made her feel oddly at home.

It could have also been the fact that she was so close to succeeding after all of these years. So close she could taste it. So close that she found herself dangerously daydreaming for the first time in years about all that could be once this was done.

Her fingers wrapped tighter around the necklace in her grasp as her heart shook faintly.

Whatever it was, there was something in the air that made her feel hopeful, alive, and a bit more whole.

A tap on her shoulder made her jump and ripped her out of her thoughts. She wrestled off her headphones as Kali crossed to join her in the windowsill.

"Any peep out of the girl?" Kali asked quietly.

Jane shook her head, "Not yet."

Kali groaned. "You're sure she can be trusted?"

"Yes, I can feel that she's good," Jane insisted, for the 20th time in three days.

"Well, you were good. And I was good. So... it's possible, I guess," Kali said with a placating smile as she looked in the direction of the threadbare mattress and the small sleeping girl, "But she hasn't said a word in five days."

"Did *you* say a word for five days after you escaped?" Jane asked curtly as she threw Kali an impatient look. "I know I hardly did. And yes, she has talked. Just not to you. You scare her."

"Yeah..." Kali nodded as she ran her fingers through her untamable hair, "I just don't want this to turn out like last time."

A familiar knife twisted in Jane's chest. She swallowed hard. "It won't."

"Mike?" a small voice muttered from the other side of the room.

Jane looked over her shoulder to the small girl who was stirring and patting her hand around her on the bed. "I see him," Jane called as she jumped up and crossed to the mattress. Jane bent down, grabbed her old teddy bear, and gently handed it to her girl, "Here you go, Sev. He's doing a good job keeping you safe, huh?"

The small girl's eyes opened as she took Jane's bear. She smiled tentatively, "Thank you."

Jane nodded kindly, "Are you hungry? I have Eggos."

"No Eggos," the girl replied as she shoved her head into her pillow.

"What's wrong with Eggos?" Jane asked in surprise.

"Too many Eggos," Sev whined quietly.

"*Never* too many Eggos," Jane said with mock insult, "I'll get you a granola bar." The small girl nodded and closed her eyes once again.

Jane bit her lip as she rose and walked to their makeshift kitchen. Kali was right. They needed to start pushing the girl. It had been almost a week since 017 had successfully escaped the New York lab, which she seemed to have done in a shockingly easy manner.

The girl was clearly powerful and cunning, or so she had seemed to demonstrate through her escape. However, she hadn't shown anything but fear and exhaustion in the days since she had tracked Jane to their new location.

They needed to get her to talk if they were going to finish this. They were so achingly close. So close she could feel the promise of freedom in her bones. It was clear, however, that they were operating more and more on borrowed time with each day that Sev remained mum about the details they needed. Kali was tasked with working her powers on overtime to keep their whereabouts untraceable. Jane could tell it was taking a toll on her.

They needed to finish this, fast.

Kali had been 'less than enthused' to say the least by the plan that Jane had created on her toes in the Void, but she had accepted it begrudgingly due to the fact that they could back out if things didn't go as planned. All they had to do was conceal their escape. It was so much less dangerous than their last attempt at anything like this, and the potential gain of gaining 017 as an ally was immense.

It had been a nerve wracking moment when the small girl had arrived, but no one was with her and no one had seemed to follow. And as such, as the first couple of days progressed, a huge bloom of hope prospered in Jane's chest. She saw the familiar trauma in the girl's eyes. She had never seen that look on another face but her own, in Mike's basement mirror on her first night of freedom.

It played on her heart.

They had gained a new sister. A new sister who could help them as they helped her.

However, in the days had progressed, that very bloom of hope had started to wilt. The girl refused to talk time and again. More and more, Jane could not shake off the feeling that they were sitting ducks.

The girl was so small. So frail. She couldn't have been older than ten years, with stark blue eyes and a shaved head with miniscule strands of chestnut hair. However, despite her age, she had shown herself to be the very best tracker any of the labs had created since 011 herself.

Jane would know. For, she'd met every single one of them in the Void.

Most of them hadn't been able to make sense of what they were seeing when Jane had made it clear that she could see them back. Sev, however, had understood immediately.

*"Help," the small girl whispered as Jane appeared to her for the first time. Her body was encased in the same old sensory deprivation suit that Jane herself remembered too well. A deep chill raised up Jane's spine.*

Back in the reality dimension, Jane had grabbed Kali's hand hard.

Kali had seemed to understand in an instant. Her eyes had dropped shut in order to obscure the conversation from signal.

*"You're safe with me. They can't hear you." Jane replied to the girl, "Who are you?"*

*The small girl tentatively raised her arm. 017 was etched into her skin. Jane sighed as she shakily raised her own arm, peeled back her sleeve, and revealed 011.*

*"Did they send you to find me?" Jane asked hesitantly.*

*The girl nodded.*

*"Is this your first try?"*

*The girl nodded again.*

*A rush of dread laced through her veins. They were getting better. Too good.*

*Time was running out.*

Maybe it was that instant panic that had made Jane act, that made her follow her instinct despite logic. Or maybe... maybe it was the eyes of a child so much like her that called out to her in a way that left her no choice.

*"Do you want out of there?" Jane asked carefully, "I can help you. Escape?"*

*The girl nodded adamantly as tears materialized at the edges of her eyes. "Help," she whispered again.*

*It was dangerous, insanely dangerous, to trust the girl to be real. She knew the quality of visions that they were capable of creating. She knew it all too well. Yet, here she was, putting in her trust fully on the line, yet again.*

*She thought fast.*

*"017, can I call you Sev? Short for Seventeen? A nickname?" Jane asked tentatively.*

*The girl stared at her with a blank lack of understanding.*

*"I'm El, short for Eleven. Just like you," she said with a smile.*

*"Oh," Sev said. Her brow furrowed as she seemed to piece out the concept. Ultimately, she nodded.*

*"Okay," Jane replied with a warm smile as she tried with all of her might to calm the girl. She walked closer to and sat within the water of the Void, "Sev? Have you ever tracked someone without the bath?"*

*"Y-Yes," she replied.*

*"Good, that's really good!" Jane replied in a true sense of surprise. She scooted herself closer as she made a plan on the fly. "Sev, I need you to do that, okay? I need you to track the people you're with and learn their routes. You're in a building. You can leave. Just like them. Learn how they do it. Can you do that?"*

*The girl began to shake as fear rose in a torrent through her features.*

*"I know it's scary, but I need you to learn how they get out of the building, and then in...in three days... I need you to come back to me. We'll make a plan to get you out of there. Can you do that?"*

*017 swallowed hard as a terror-filled tear spilled from her eye.*

*"You can do it," Jane replied encouragingly, " If you do it, and you get out, I'll let you track me. You can find me. I can kind of tell where you are, but not quite, so I'll come close to you. Come back to me in three days?"*

*The little girl nodded as she glanced over her shoulder nervously.*

*"And Sev," Jane added abruptly, "Do not tell Papa. Do not tell anyone. Do not tell them you saw me. Do you understand?"*

*"Yes." she whispered shakily.*

*"Good. Promise me you won't tell Papa," Jane repeated softly as she leaned in as close to the girl as she could.*

*"Promise?"*

*"It..." the definition came to her in a voice that was not hers. She smiled sadly as it played like a song in her mind. "It means something that you can't break. Ever."*

*"P-promise," the girl stammered.*

*"Good," Jane said as she stood up. "Find me in three days, Sev. I'll be close. Follow them. Remember. You saw nothing. And don't tell Papa."*

*The girl swallowed and nodded frantically before she quickly she faded from view.*

Jane never expected that the girl would escape in such a clean manner. No deaths. No instant triggers. A perfectly executed escape. Jane had a habit of making quite a scene whenever did something similar, from the very beginning. Stealth had never been her strong suit. Her new small sister was clearly more powerful than she let on as she sat doe eyed on the mattress and rubbed sleep from her eyes. She sat up as Jane knelt back down by the mattress and handed her the final granola bar and a Hi-C. Her tiny body positively swam in Jane's ratty hand me down Replacements t-shirt.

Mike the Bear was still held tightly in the crook of Sev's arm as she took the granola bar and munched quietly.

"Sev," Jane started tentatively. "If I let you sleep late will you help me today? Find the bad men? We have to find them soon if we're going to keep you safe."

The girl was silent as she chewed her granola bar.

"No," she finally said.

Jane sighed, "Sev, we need to talk about this or we're not safe."

The small girl sighed as a trill of fear coursed, yet again, through her eyes. "Tomorrow?" she finally whispered.

"Do you promise?" Jane asked carefully.

Sev grimaced and paused. She shut her eyes tightly for a moment before looking back at Jane. "I... promise."

"Okay. Tomorrow then. Get some rest," Jane replied as helpless stress rose into her chest.

Sev laid back down without so much as another peep, the bear cuddled deeply into her embrace.

Jane rose from the edge of the mattress and crossed to the other side of the room where Kali sat with a sour face.

"Well?" Kali asked suspiciously.

"Tomorrow..." Jane replied as she steeled her nerves for the onslaught. "But she promised."

"What the hell does that matter?" Kali exclaimed, a little too loud.

"Shh, she's sleeping. She'll keep the promise."

Jane avoided Kali's eyes, though she could have drawn a picture of the face she was surely receiving.

"We don't have the time, Jane," she barked in a whisper.

"I KNOW," Jane snapped back, "It *will* be tomorrow. I promise."

Kali's tone was resigned as she continued. "If I'm going to do this another day I need supplies. I'm running low on energy and we hardly have anything left."

Jane nodded in a clear understanding. "Can you make me a list?"

Kali crossed the room without a word. She rummaged out a pen and paper from her well packed backpack and scratched down a few necessities while Jane wrestled on her oversized winter coat.

Kali returned and shoved the list into Jane's hand, "Wear a wig and please don't draw any attention to yourself. Be careful."

"I know," Jane huffed, "I'm always careful."

"You're *usually* careful," Kali corrected with a smirk. "Be careful today."

Jane nodded and crossed to her own backpack to pull out a wig, "Just keep her safe, will you? I'll be back soon."

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Mike cursed under his breath as the train trundled through the cold mid-morning tunnel. This was... stupid. However, he could find no other way out of it.

Ted Wheeler's old college buddy Sal was intent on finding Mike a 'suitable job', which definitely meant exactly what it sounded like. Suit. Tie. The man. 9-5. Two weeks vacation. Pension. Retirement. Early Death.

It wasn't happening.

So why was he on this train at ten in the morning dragging his ass to 44th and 8th Ave for a coffee? He honestly couldn't answer it for himself. He had pushed the meeting off four times in the six months he'd been in the city. But if he pushed it off once more his Dad might actually call him and talk to him just to give him shit, and a phone call with Ted Wheeler was literally the last thing he wanted. Let alone the cold shoulder he would likely receive from his girlfriend, who seemed firmly settled in the Ted Wheeler camp of future planning.

A 45-minute coffee with the old college buddy would have to do.

However, he had made sure not to comb his unruly mop of hair, and he was certain the hoodie and jeans he was wearing were going to be seen as scandalous and wildly inappropriate for such a meeting.

That was, honestly, the point.

"42nd Street / 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue" the voice rumbled over the intercom.

Mike begrudgingly stood up, shoved his hands in his pockets, and exited the train car.



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"50th Street Station - This is a downtown bound A Train"

The choppy intercom blared as Jane stepped into the grubby train car.

She absolutely loved the train.

It was electrifying to watch little girls play Cat's Cradle next to a businessman who was reading the Times, next to a junkie who was still riding the train after sleeping on its plastic seats the night before. The entire scene was topped off with erratic and impossible to read graffiti.

Everyone was anonymous. Everyone was a stranger.

It was so incredibly freeing.

She smiled as she ran her fingers through her straight blond wig. Of all of her disguises, her first was still her favorite.

"42nd Street / 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue"

The train began to slow as they reached the station.

"Hey! My purse! Get off!" A small woman shrieked as the junkie who had recently been sleeping made a fast and sloppy attempt at a snatch. The train erupted in screams as the small schoolgirls tried to back away from the scuffle.

"Shit..." Jane grumbled as she scanned the room for a heavy object. A hardcopy of John Grisham's 'The Client' flew from an elderly man's hands and through the air at full speed. It smacked the perpetrator directly in the face. He crashed to the ground as the blow rendered him unconscious.

The doors opened.

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Mike dragged his feet as he slowly made his way down the platform toward the stairs. A rush of wind smashed against his face. He felt his hair fly up as a train careened out of the tunnel on the downtown

track to his left.

"Good," he thought, "Please make me look messier."

The train came to a stop and the doors to the car on his left opened up to reveal intense commotion. He watched with surprise as a book flew through half of the train car and hit a man square in the face.

"Good aim..." he said to himself with surprise as the man fell to the floor, knocked out cold.

Mike jumped as a throng of schoolgirls ran screaming from the train car and almost bowled him over in their mad dash. A small old woman huffed, kicked the man on the ground, and lumbered her way out of the train. A pretty young blonde woman by the door wiped her nose casually as she turned away from the commotion and faced toward the exit.

Mike's feet froze.

Her arm hung casually from the strap of the train car as she tucked a blond strand of hair behind her ear to reveal her always delicate profile. She was draped in an oversized and unbuttoned grey pea coat. Beneath it was the same old Clash t-shirt she had worn every day of 10th grade.

It had been over six years, but it didn't matter her age. He would have recognized the arch of her lips and the exact honey hue of her eyes anywhere, in any year, at any age.

She was just as beautiful as the day she'd left.

Mike gasped and watched in agony as the doors to the train car closed between them.

"El?!" he called suddenly as his feet took him hypnotically after the moving train.

El Hopper looked out of the window as the train began to move. Her eyes locked on his.

He swore that he saw her lips mouth his name as the train sped out

of the station.

## 2. Chapter 2

Mike clearly missed the coffee meeting. After running full speed to 34th Street station, hopping the turnstile, not finding her, running back to 42nd Street station, hopping the turnstile again, not finding her, and almost getting arrested, he was over an hour late. His pager had gone off three times with what he could only imagine was the coffee shop's telephone number.

It didn't matter at all.

Tears and panic stung his body as he stood aimlessly on the corner at 42nd Street and 9th Ave. She had been so close. Literally *feet* from him. Yet, just like that, she was gone again without a trace.

Why hadn't he dashed onto the train car? Why hadn't he yelled her name right away? Why had he just stood there like a complete idiot and let El Hopper slide right back out of his life?

Mike growled in frustration. "If you can hear me, I'm here!" he cried desperately into the air.

A woman and her small child gave him a large berth as they walked past and eyed him cautiously.

It began to rain.

"Perfect," he muttered to himself.

Mike walked in dejected shock the entire fifteen blocks back to his home. The rain, at first a sprinkle, became a frigid winter storm as the blocks progressed. By the time he returned to his loft he was drenched and shivering from head to toe. He could hardly tell, though, through his daze. He peeled off each layer of his soaked clothing as he tried in vain to rationalize what had just happened. His adrenalin began to dissipate and, in its place, an unbearably heavy sadness overtook his body.

Mike's eyes fell numbly on his black backpack in the corner of this room as he dried off with a dirty towel from the floor. It called to

him, but he simply couldn't yet. It would have to wait.

At a complete loss for what to do, Mike wrapped himself in the towel and crawled into his bed. He simply laid there, numb and overwhelmed. Her face drifted through his mind with relentless consistency for hours on end as he drifted in and out of a restless sleep. The fresh snapshot of her face, the first he had seen in almost seven years, with soft blonde hair and wide almond eyes, melded with this memory in a dizzying hue.

*...the dreams...*

Had he sensed her? Had she been sending him messages? She hadn't been able to communicate via dreams in the past, but who knew how much stronger her powers had become in the intervening years. His brain began to spin as he thought it over.

Had he known?

The sensation hit him like a truck, and it made the entire experience vividly real. He had to have known, somehow, somewhere in the depths of his mind, that she was near.

And slowly, for the first time since he had seen her face staring wide eyed from the train car mouthing his name, a smile crept to his lips. The rushing beat of his heart took on a different cadence. One he hadn't felt in so very long. He breathed into it deeply like fresh air.

El Hopper was alive. And she was *here*.

And he was going to find her.

Mike bolted up from his bed in the now pitch dark room. The daylight hours had long passed, sacrificed to his fitful rest. Despite the late hour, he put on fresh clothes and combed his hair with a real comb for the first time in days. He returned to his bedroom and shook his head in disbelief as he walked straight to the old Supercomm, propped up on his makeshift bedside table.

He chuckled darkly as he fidgeted with the knobs of the outdated machine.

He took a ragged deep breath and steadied himself. His fingers trembled as he touched the button.

*Click*

"El? If you can hear me... It's Mike. Mike...Wheeler? I can't - I can't believe I'm on this thing but if there's any chance you can hear me, *please find me*. I'm close. I'm... really really close. I don't know if its safe to say more but please find me. *Please*. This is -This is Day 1."

Mike clicked his finger off of the button and sat on his bed, waiting. For what, he wasn't sure. It wasn't like she was going to simply respond.

The moments ticked away as he blankly stared at the wall and helplessness clouded over him once again. Bile rose into this throat as it robbed him of his momentary hope. The warehouse was suddenly a doppelganger his parent's basement. He could almost smell the shag carpet and his mom cooking upstairs. His hands suddenly felt smaller, weaker, and more like a boy's. His fingers dug painfully into the well worn blanket on his bed. He squinted his eyes to stop a tear.

BEEP BEEP

Mike jumped in surprise, pulled out of his reverie. He rummaged through the pocket of his jeans to pull out his beeper.

"Shiiiiit," he groaned as Marissa's number tugged across the dull green screen.

Information on Christmas...

El Hopper was wandering the streets of New York like a needle in a haystack and he was supposed to *leave town*?

He didn't have time to think about that now.

Mike haphazardly tossed the beeper onto his bed and stalked over to his computer. He resolutely sat down, stretched his arms, and stared with determination at the black screen.

He had to try something. Anything. And this was all that he had.

He booted up his computer and got to work.

It had been hard at first, gaining backend access to the servers of the Department of Energy. But, then again, he had started trying when he was 18, without any formal training. MIT had given him an incredible education on doing just what he needed to do, and thus it had become easier over time. And this place, this incredible space he was so lucky to live in, had opened the gates wide open. He could safely traverse the government servers with little to no worry of retaliation.

It allowed him all of the space and time he needed to find her. Well, not *her*, exactly. Every file they had on her. Every mention of the program. Every single bit of information he could pull out of any server he could crack. Anything he could quarantine and wipe free.

Slowly, line by line, Mike had erased 011 from the government's memory.

It was the only thing he could do to keep her safe.

He had successfully hacked and purged 156 files on her over the last five years, 85 of them classified. 95 came from the Department of Energy and focused on her existence prior to her escape. 61 were housed in the NSA, CIA and FBI servers. Most of those files chronicled attempts to discern out her whereabouts post-escape. Within those were a series of four classified reports from November 1991. They detailed a botched attempt to capture her and 008 in Philadelphia. From what Mike was able to tell, it had been a glorious disaster in El's favor. And it had been proof, concrete undeniable proof, that she was alive and still on the run.

He had also found 3 reports on himself and his family. 2 each on Lucas, Dustin and Steve. 15 on Will and the Byers family. 22 on Hopper. Step by step, he had painstakingly purged each of them from the databases. Between the purge and his regular surveillance to ensure that there were no taps on anyone's phones, he effectively ensured a modicum of safety for everyone who had been involved.

It wasn't fool proof, he knew that. But, it was something.

However, there wasn't much time left. The government bureaus were starting to catch up on the hilariously outdated security protocols of their server systems. As a result, it was becoming harder and more dangerous to crack into their databases. However, he felt more and more confident that he was almost done. He had not found a new document on her in nine months.

Mike booted up his program and pointed it at the Department of Energy as he had so many times. It had always been the easiest to hack, and he could really use a quick win right now. He went through the old channels, traveling through them with a familiarity akin to the halls of his childhood home.

He had cleaned this server out at least ten times over in the last six years, but every once in awhile a new file appeared with information and documentation on 011. It was clear that someone on the inside was trying to replicate the files that he continually purged. It left him resolutely happy to find that each time the documentation was thinner and less detailed. They were losing their knowledge of her piece by piece through his digital sieve.

Mike's eyes narrowed in surprise as a new document arose.

12/18/93 8:54AM

"Today?" Mike breathed as he worked to crack into the file. The screen filled with rigid type:

\*\*\**CLASSIFIED*\*\*\*

*011 and 008 confirmed perpetrators of 017 kidnapping on 12/12/93 from NYC Alternative Study Lab. 281 11th Avenue. Alert CIA, FBI, NSA, NYPD, NYFD of female, 23, Caucasian; female, 27, Indian; female 10, Caucasian. Corresponding tattoos to listed numbers. Extremely armed and dangerous. Lethal action permitted. Report to non-classifieds as domestic kidnapping.*

"Holy shit." Mike gasped. "Holy shit."

Dread laced through every inch of Mike's body as fresh panic rose in his chest. Hands shaking violently, he scraped the document onto his



personal hard drive and embarked on the task of purging it from the government server as quickly as he could.

CIA, FBI, NSA, NYPD, NYFD.

Each one would have similar documentation...

Mike had a long night ahead of him.

---

*"Don't do it. Don't do it. Don't find him. Don't track him. It's not safe. Oh My God he might be 100 feet away. Don't track him. Don't do it. Remember last time. Don't. "*

El sat freezing on the ledge of the rooftop in the first traces of dawn. Music blared in her ears so loudly that it hurt. Yet it wasn't working to distract her in the way she desperately needed. Her fingers twitched dangerously against the FM dial, ready to search for an empty channel against every single one of her instincts.

She hadn't slept a wink.

Her fingers twitched again, and the channel grew with static before she abruptly stopped herself, turning it back to the channel as Smashing Pumpkins 'Today' began to play. She tried to zone into the song, one of her current favorites.

...The lyrics were... not helping.

It couldn't have been him, she told herself resolutely for the hundredth time. It was merely a trick of the light through the foggy window of a moving train. That, or something much more sinister and much more necessary to avoid.

However, the stirring in her gut screamed to her that she was lying to herself.

Memories had assaulted her all through the night as she'd laid on her dilapidated mattress and tried to chase a sleep that never came. With the intensity of a tidal wave, everything she had worked so hard to

push down over the last many years rushed back through every corner of her mind and body. The way his hands felt in her hair. The way his eyes lit up when she said his name. The splay of freckles across his cheeks that she never tired of tracing. The time they had escaped the hall monitors in 9th grade, laughing the entire way, after they'd been caught playing hooky in the broom closet. His kindness. His relentless caring. Her first friend. Her only love. The way every part of her screamed when she had walked away from him, for everyone's safety. Her very presence toxic to their lives. The Void and the deception and everything she had lost because she fell for it like a stupid love sick idiot.

Jane rocked back and forth as it washed over her yet again. She pulled her coat more tightly around her as she stared out over the city. She stuffed her fingers deeper into her pockets in search of warmth that was not there.

"What are you doing up here? It's five in the morning," Kali called in a hushed whisper as her face appeared, from behind the door to the rooftop.

"No, just... enjoying the view. Can't sleep." Jane replied as casually as she could.

Kali eyed her suspiciously. "Jane, you're turning blue..."

"Never bothered me before. Go back to sleep, Kali. I'll be fine." Jane brushed her off.

Kali tossed her hands up in the air with a minor frustration and huffed, "Okay, but I need you to be in full form if we're going to get to work today."

"I understand," Jane said firmly.

Jane watched Kali return through the roof door. Kali was a good sister and partner in crime. Intelligent. Motivated. Caring. Someone she trusted inexplicably with her safety.

Things had gotten much better between them once Jane had convinced her to set her sites directly on destroying Papa and The

Project, instead of picking off the errant henchmen one by one. But in the two years since the deception, in the years since they had lost their crew in such a horrifying way, Kali had become harder, gruffer, and increasingly resentful. Jane didn't blame her. She had made a stupid mistake, but she regretted taking every day for the past two years.

But what was she to do when she believed they had him?

She cursed under her breath as the familiar knife turned yet again in her chest once again.

It only made her present decision more painstaking.

Tears stung her eyes as a fresh wave of longing crashed over her. Yet again, like a movie playing in her mind, she saw his beautiful gobsmacked face as the train away from him, his deep brown eyes wide. 'El' shaped on his lips.

She hadn't had to fight back the urge to track him for years. It had been an hourly compulsion in the beginning, and each time she'd stopped herself for fear they could infiltrate her whenever she was in the Void. She had shut down her access to the Void like a steel wall inside of her mind in an attempt to keep herself safe when she left. Yet, in all of that, she had had to make one excruciating sacrifice. She could not see Mike.

It had taken about three years for Jane and Kali to deduce that her own tracking did not put them in harm's way... but by then it was too scary. She couldn't bring herself to find him. For fear of how he might have changed. ...for fear that he might have moved on.

So, in seven years, she had only tracked him once.

Three days after their escape from the Philadelphia lab. Three days after the biggest mistake of her life. She just had to make sure he was truly safe.

And he had been.

The three minutes of seeing him in the winter of 1991 were so painful that she couldn't fully breathe for days afterward. He had

been simply sitting at a desk staring at a huge computer, his eyes strained yet drawn to the screen. He had looked both like a different person and the very same boy she had left behind. Time had both changed him and left him exactly the same. She had missed every step that had changed him so.

He has still been so beautiful...

A heady gust of wind blew Jane's hood off and brought her back to the first light of dawn. Her fingers had twitched against the dial, without her awareness.

Static played in her ears.

She felt so nervous she could puke.

She was going to regret this...

...So she had to do it fast before she could think better and stop herself.

El took a deep breath, and closed her eyes.

*He appeared in an instant.*

*Mike Wheeler sat huddled up on the wooden slats of a dock, draped in a black puffy coat. He cradled a paper cup of coffee in his hands. Anxiety and exhaustion were written into the lines of his brow. Jane crossed to him on shaky legs and studied him in detail. Her lip trembled as her heartbeat broke through her with a raging intensity that she could not control. He was broader. Some of his freckles had faded. A shadow of black stubble played across his jawline. His eyes looked tired, worn. Yet, they still carried the same lively spark.*

*He was a man now, she thought, with a sad smile.*

*But he was... Mike.*

*Jane choked on tears.*

*"Where are you?" Mike whispered to nothing.*

Jane's eyes popped open to the dark grey of the New York City dawn. Every part of her body shaking, but no longer from the cold. Tears rushed down her face and clouded her vision as her eyes fell to a specific dock toward the south below her. She wiped them away as she squinted in disbelief. A lone figure sat, just barely visible, in the first light of dawn.

"How?" she breathed in shock.

She was on her feet before she could think.

It was a terrible idea, given the circumstances. A reckless, insane, absolutely suicidal idea. The timing was absolute shit.

She couldn't go.

She had to go.

---

Mike sat at the edge of the water on the cold wooden slats of a random dock. He blew on an overly hot and watered down corner store cup of coffee as he watched the sky wake up from a dark night. Waves of exhaustion played over his anxiety riddled mind. His eyes, his hands, his brain and his body felt utterly depleted.

"Where are you?" he whispered to nothing.

He had purged twenty-five documents from six servers in one night. He had had to crack into two servers he had never cracked before in the process. NYPD had been surprisingly difficult. He would have been impressed with his skill but for the fact that he knew it wasn't enough. Given the amount of documentation he had traced from a single day he was certain the information had already spread too deeply. It was surely now in the hands of every government security force with jurisdiction to operate within New York City. He might have slowed down their tracking, but there was no way he had stopped it entirely.

There was more to do, and someone who needed to know, but it was too early to call and he was too exhausted and fried to have any

conversations.

So instead, he had come to watch the boats in a vain attempt to clear his mind. Maybe, he thought, if he got out of the loft he would wind down enough to sleep. Though, he regarded wryly, the coffee had probably been a bad ingredient if that had been his goal.

He focused on his breath and closed his eyes as exhaustion slowly won out over every other feeling. It was time to go back. His exhale was heavy as he rolled his shoulders in order to wake up his cold body enough to walk. He heaved forward clumsily to rise and stumbled on locked legs. "Shit!" he cursed as his hand lost his grip on his coffee cup. He scrambled back quickly to avoid the burning liquid.

Yet, the burning liquid did not leave the cup, and the cup did not leave the air. Rather, it suspended inches from his leg, perfectly frozen in a stunning mid spill.

Mike blinked in disbelief.

His stomach flipped as he slowly turned toward the dock entrance.

"El."

### 3. Chapter 3

1991

"No no no no no NO no no no –"

"Keep your VOICE DOWN." Kali growled at less than a whisper through clenched teeth, blood streaming from her nose and tears from her eyes as she worked to obscure their position from sight with every last shred of energy she possessed.

Jane weakly slid down the wall in the once sterile hallway as she surveyed the damage through hot tears. Bodies were strewn everywhere, consisting of government agents, at least three numbered Projects, and every single member of their party.

She had failed them. She had failed all of them. Her stomach heaved violently against her mouth.

The boots of a second fleet of gunmen echoed against the tiles of the adjacent hallway. Jane crouched closer to the ground as a scope appeared around the corner. "All clear." The boots trudged along, passing by Jane and Kali within a foot of their invisible position.

Kali wordlessly yanked Jane's arm and guided her carefully through the maze of bodies down the long hallway. Her legs felt like lead weight, unwilling to move at any speed faster than molasses. "Faster!" Kali breathed, pulling her harder.

She pushed Jane against the wall as the sound of more boots echoed down the hallway ahead of them. Kali focused the last remaining resources of her strength and closed her eyes.

"Down here! 011 is down here!" cried a disembodied voice from deep within the recesses of the facility.

Footsteps rang from the walls as they ran straight past them to the source of a voice that didn't exist.

Kali clamped her hand on Jane's arm one last time and dragged her through the final hallway. They silently ghosted past two final

guards, slipped through the frame of a busted glass door and escaped noiselessly into the night.

The streets of Philadelphia felt cold and unwelcoming as they ducked through alleys, backyards and underbrush, running to somewhere, anywhere, that possibly felt safe. After what felt like all night Kali stopped them at a shrouded dead end in an industrial corner of the city.

"Unlock that," Kali commanded, pointing to a seemingly abandoned semi truck. Jane obeyed numbly and popped the lock. She crawled over the passenger seat, found the entrance to the cramped crashpad in the back, curled up and closed her eyes tight.

No solace existed behind her eyelids. Visions assaulted her as she watched the events play out over and over again in the dark of her mind. How could she have been so careless? The three Projects had surrounded them, backed by a throng of agents, fully prepared for their arrival in a well set trap. Her team had been no match for it, every one of them felled quickly by the government agents as the Projects focused on Jane and Kali.

Conversely though, the Projects had been absolutely no match for *her*. They had each fallen, one by one, as they put up only feeble fights against the raw and unmatched force she possessed, a force only amplified further by her rage against the trap. It was a silver lining in the carnage, three down, the entirety of Projects that they had anticipated to be inside the Philadelphia lab, but the casualties had been far too high for her to feel any solace in their decimation.

Kali crawled onto the other side of the small cot, out of view of the windows, and collapsed against the wall. Silence filled the space in an achingly terrifying way. When Kali finally did speak, she spoke slowly in a gut wrenching measured and calculating tone. It felt worse than any yelling. "When Mike came to you for help in the Void... Did you ensure that it was truly him? Did you try to track him elsewhere? Or did you send us in for immediate slaughter on the basis of one panicked vision?"

"I'm so sorry. He seemed so real I just... I thought I knew," Jane replied through shaking breaths.



Kali forcefully grabbed Jane's collar and pulled her face to meet hers. "Your *emotions* got four of your teammates killed tonight. Do you understand that? And it almost killed you. And it almost killed me. Your *emotions* almost let them win. They are getting smarter, Jane. They are developing new mind controls, and they tricked you tonight."

Jane shook as Kali's unbridled agony spit against her face, her eyes on fire, "Listen to me. I need you to KILL IT. Whatever you still feel for that boy, you *must* kill it in your heart. Or else it is going to kill us. He is a weapon against you as long as you hold any love for him. Tell yourself he's moved on. Tell yourself he's dead. Pretend he didn't exist for all I care. But NEVER mix our safety up with your emotions ever again. Do you understand me?"

"I-I understand," Jane stuttered.

---

The icy wind off of the river threatened to blow away Jane's short black pixie wig as she approached the dock. She pulled up her hood and drew the string tight. Anticipation, dread, fear, guilt and longing warred dangerously within her, causing her to shake as her feet stepped onto the wooden slats.

The details of his body came slowly into view in the dull morning light. Jane's mind willed her to turn back around as her heart smashed dangerously against her ribs. Her feet, however, kept resolutely marching in his direction. It was as though he was a magnet, pulling her body each step of the way.

She fought to steady her breath in order to keep her strength focused. She had seen nothing on her walk that made her believe she was being tracked, watched or followed this morning. This did not *feel* like a trap. The magnet pulled her onward.

Jane stopped abruptly, fifteen feet away, as she watched him attempt to stand and then falter, a cup slipping from his hands. The slightest push of force suspended the falling cup in the air. She watched eagle-eyed as his face shifted in surprise from the cup to her.

"El."

Mike Wheeler stood up slowly from the dock, his eyes wide. He shook his hair out of his eyes to fully reveal his face. Warm relief filled his eyes as he greeted her with a tired awe-filled smile. He took a step to close a gap between them, "You came..."

Every part of her screamed to run away. Every part of her screamed to run to him.

"Don't come any closer," She commanded, hating herself as she watched his eyes rush with fear, "Tell me something only you and I know."

"What?" Mike asked in sudden confusion, his feet stopping in their tracks.

"Tell me something only you can know, please," she repeated, the shaky pleading in her voice betraying her strength.

Mike shook his head erratically. "Um... Okay..." he stammered, his face lit up in thought, "You-you hate peas?"

"Everyone knows that. What else?" Jane replied firmly.

"Okay..." he said slowly, his eyes transfixed on her in confusion as his hands rose visibly in the air in an act of surrender, "When we were fifteen? Do you remember when Dustin shot soda out of his nose in spurts like a sprinkler? It got all over my basement and I was grounded for three days because it ruined the sofa?"

"Yes, I remember. Tell me another," Jane replied quickly, her resolve slipping as hope began to break through her body.

"Um... How about... Oh! How about that time when I played hooky from school three days in a row to sneak over to see you in the cabin while you were still in hiding, and - and you made me watch that terrible soap opera every single day but I never told you I hated it because I didn't want you to tell me stop coming over?"

"There's nothing wrong with *The Young and the Restless*," Jane scoffed, a smile fighting its way onto face.

Mike took a tentative step in her direction, his hands still in the air, "I mean, no, not really *wrong* I guess. But boring. Definitely boring. I mean, I had Star Wars tapes and Ghostbusters and ET but you just -"

"-Mike-"

The coffee cup dropped from the air and splashed against the abandoned dock as her feet flew in his direction. She careened into him hard and pressed deeply into his puffy coat. She felt his arms wrap around her firmly in return.

"I knew it was you yesterday. I just knew it." He whispered as his chin rested against her forehead, "Oh my God, I can't believe this."

A dissonance washed over her, magnificently scrambling her senses. It was mind bending, exhilarating, and so incredibly hard to comprehend that she was standing on a dock in New York City at 23 years old with Mike Wheeler in her arms. She breathed him in as far as her lungs could expand as she debated how long could she stay this way before it got weird.

El pulled away from him quickly as her senses returned. She nervously stepped back and slipped her cold hands into her pockets as she looked up to face him.

"Hi..." she uttered lamely.

Mike only laughed, his eyes alive as he met her gaze as he shook his head in disbelief. She scanned his face ravenously with her eyes, trying to convince herself he was real. He was so different now. His jawline more angled, the slightest hint of smile crinkles beginning to form at the outer corners of his eyes. The shadow of his beard and wild black hair made him look rugged and manly.

Mike Wheeler, rugged and manly. Jane felt herself blush at the thought.

"How did you find me?" she asked breathlessly, returning her thoughts to the present moment.

"What? You found me. Like, right now?" Mike corrected, a trill of a nervous laugh still dancing through his words.

"No, no *yesterday*. How?" she pleaded, wide eyed.

"Oh, That was a total accident! I live here. Just down that way like 10 or 15 blocks," he said, pointing toward the south.

They stood in silence for a brief and awkward moment, both at a complete loss of what to say. Confusion suddenly knitted his brow, "Weren't you blonde yesterday?"

"Wigs. Safety," she replied with a shrug.

He nodded emphatically, "Oh, right. Good idea. Well, it looks good," he offered with a sheepish smile before continuing, "I mean, they both looked good. *You* look really...really good, I mean..." he stammered, his face turning pink, "Wow. I'm really happy to see you."

"Me too," she breathed as she fought her smile from growing even more ridiculously large.

Mike broke eye contact and suddenly looked over his shoulder, "Um...We should probably get you away from here though, right? You're not safe outside?"

And with that, the moment cracked like an earthquake.

Jane's smile fell from her face, "What do you mean? How do you know that?"

Mike winced and paused, "Good point. That's probably really weird that I know that. Um...", he looked back to her, his hands clamping down on her shoulders, "El, I need you to trust me. I know a lot, like, *a lot* about what's going on – but no one knows I know. Okay?"

"What...does that mean? What are you talking about?" Jane replied slowly, coldly, as she backed away from his touch.

"Shit, no its just... look, this is going to take me a really reallllly long time to explain, but please, I need you to trust me. They don't know about me and they don't know that I know. I can help you. I want to help you." Mike sputtered, "Can we just... go somewhere safe and talk? Anywhere you want."

Waves of dread and suspicion coursed through Jane's veins as she inspected his drawn and worried face. Suddenly, she could see every way in which he had aged. Every feature that made him look like a stranger visible in achingly sharp relief. A siren blared off in the distance and snapped her back to attention.

"Fine." She said curtly, turning from him and walking stiffly back to the entrance of the pier. She shoved her hands in her pockets to conceal their shaking. He silently rushed forward to keep pace. Jane's senses returned to high alert as each noise and movement in her periphery exhibited a potential threat.

She forced her body to walk casually across the sidewalk, Mike stride by stride by her side. Together, they entered the tall grey buildings of the city.

"This way," she commanded as she abruptly turned left down a deserted alleyway. She spied a thin gate between buildings, slipped the lock effortlessly and eased in, Mike following obediently in tow. A utility door appeared to the left. It opened on its own and she sidled inside, tugging Mike's arm to follow. She eased the door shut and clicked the lock.

The room was pitch dark but for a few strands of light breaking in through a vent above the doorway. It was very small, and contained two noisy water heaters. Perfect.

Jane slipped to the floor and huddled near a heater. "You *are* Mike?" she asked suddenly.

"Of course I am..." Mike replied tentatively, "El, I don't understand."

"No, I don't understand," Jane interrupted shakily, "What do you know? How... do you know?"

"El..." Mike sighed nervously as he crouched beside her on the floor. His hand brushed against her pinkie. She pulled her hand away. "Yesterday, after I saw you, I broke into the servers."

"The servers..." Jane replied in confusion.

"Oh, right," Mike stammered, "So a server is... well, you know

computers right?"

"Yes." Jane's eyes slowly adjusted to the dark and Mike reappeared in shadow, as animated and earnest as he'd ever been.

"Okay, so each bunch of computers at a building, or a government department, or anything like that, is set up to a server. And that's the place where all of the computer documents are stored and shared from. Kind of like a big digital filing cabinet, Right? So, I've gotten really good at breaking into servers from my own computer. It's called hacking. I... well, I broke into the Department of Energy's server yesterday. It's like, stupidly easy to hack. Anyway, I broke into that server after I saw you and I found everything. So I know you *somehow* helped a test subject escape last week? Which, wow. But El, they only figured out it was you yesterday, so they just put out a directive to bring you in yesterday morning. I caught it really fast. I hacked into every agency it was sent to and I wiped all of it. I erased everything from Department of Energy, NSA, CIA, FBI, NYPD and... and the NYFD servers last night. I haven't slept."

Jane's heart began to smack against her chest for a whole new reason. They knew she had 017. Mike knew they knew she had 017. "What?" she asked in a bewildered whisper, "They know... but they don't?"

"Well, not entirely, I got rid of everything as best I could," Mike replied with a shrug, "The information spread really really fast though so I need you to be really careful, okay? There's definitely still some people after you. Just not as many. Or I slowed them down. I need to do another sweep today."

Jane felt dizzy from the onslaught of information. She had so many questions... "How? How do you know how to do that?" she stammered.

"Oh, I do it all the time," Mike replied casually, "I got really good at it in college. But I got lucky catching all of that yesterday. It's not usually that intense. Then again, *you* don't usually steal a test subject, so..."

"So..." Jane interrupted, slowly trying to wrap her mind around the

concept, "You can make information go *away*? Vanish. Without being where the information is?"

"Yeah, that's kind of what I do," Mike replied with a nod.

Jane's eyes went as wide as saucers, "Mike," she breathed in awe, "That's magic, Mike."

Mike laughed humbly, "No El, what *you* do is magic. What I do is just a nerdy hobby that's come in really *really* handy. I can show you sometime so it makes more sense?"

Jane sat gobsmacked on the ground, staring at him wordlessly as an errant ray of hope bloomed in her mind, "Can you make... the rest... *all of it*... go away?"

"Oh, you mean the rest of the stuff they have on you?" She nodded fervently. Mike smiled broadly and rested his hand reassuringly on hers. She did not pull away this time. "It's uh... It's already done, El."

"What?" El's breath caught in her throat.

"Everything I've been able to find in the last six years," Mike informed her, "I mean, I can't guarantee it's all destroyed because there might be some hard files somewhere, but...yeah, there's *a lot* less people that know about you now. I got rid of all of it and then made some decoy files to throw them off the scent here and there. I've wanted to tell you for a really long time but I never knew how to find you."

Jane paused as she fought to comprehend, "...You've been making *all of this* go away? All this time?"

Mike nodded and shrugged, "Yeah, it was the least I could do to help."

Jane's stared at Mike in fascination, her jaw slack in shock as her mind raced to grasp the gravity of what he had just said. Mike raised his eyes to meet hers full on, a question without words written within them. They were dark pools, as easy to fall into as they had always been. Rushes of warmth cascaded through Jane's every cell. Nothing Mike had said made any sense. Then again, none of it made any sense. But she could not help but feel enveloped in a cloud safety that

her soul had not felt in so very long.

Mike's fingers rustled against hers tentatively, "El?" she questioned, his expression turning nervous.

A dam of feeling burst open in her chest at his utterance of her name. She pulled herself into him roughly, making him rock back in surprise so they didn't spill over as she buried her face deep into the crook of his neck and let it wash over her.

"Thank you, Mike," she whispered through tears.

"Oh El..." he breathed against her ear.

"I haven't heard that name in so long," she uttered with a light laugh, "It's Jane now."

"Do you... do you want me to call you Jane?" he asked quietly.

"No!" she replied forcefully as she pulled away and smiled at him, "El. To you, I'm El."

"Okay," he whispered, returning her smile brilliantly before pulling her back in harder, his hand reaching up to cradle her neck. His voice cracked with tears as he spoke, "I can't believe this. I've missed you... so much, El."

Jane laughed against his shoulder in crashes of shocked glee, her terror and pain unwinding rapidly within his embrace, "Me too, Mike. Me t-"

BEEP BEEP

Jane shot back from his body in surprise.

"Sorry..." Mike mumbled as his hands patted his pockets.

BEEP BEEP

Mike wrestled a small beeper out of his coat pocket and pushed the silencer. He groaned as he stared at a series of numbers crossing the tiny screen.



"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing," Mike grimaced, avoiding her eyes as he shoved the beeper back into his coat, "It's just... my girlfriend."

## 4. Chapter 4

When she appeared on the dock in the early morning light it was like seeing her for the very first time. Within the spinning of his sleep deprived mind he regarded her as a beautiful stranger, foreign to him after all of these years. Her delicate frame was wrapped in an oversized peacoat and clunky scuffed combat boots. Black locks brushed against her cheeks, which had grown rosy in the cold. Warm caramel colored eyes and lips nipped red by the chill.

He only snapped to attention as her voice filled the air. It smashed through his senses, making him keenly aware that it was resolutely El who stood in his path. She still possessed the same trilling voice that made his knees weak when he was young. It was a unique tone that made every word she said sound so important. In the recesses of his mind, he could almost hear the shadow of this same voice whispering 'I love you' against his ear for the first time in their most intimate moment, only two weeks before she abruptly vanished from his life.

And with that, the following moments were a blur of El, bewildering and overwhelming, despite the rollercoaster of their interaction.

Yet now, on the dark cold floor of the utility closet, as Mike watched Marissa's number flash across his beeper screen, reality smashed into him with an intensity that made him feel queasy. A rebellious corner of his mind would not relent. It called him to the spot on his neck which still tingled from where El's warm breath had brushed his skin. It made him feel the shadow of her body pressed into his, warm and alive as he'd dared to wish for so long. It was a sensation that, if you had asked him just the morning prior, he would have told you lived only in memory. It was a sensation he guiltily knew he would do anything to feel again. He swallowed hard and worked to right his mind to focus on true reality of the situation, the year, and the circumstances.

"I'll deal with that later," Mike muttered hastily as he pocketed his beeper.

El suddenly seemed supremely focused on straightening a few tendrils of her short black wig that crinkled with static from the cold

air. After a long and pregnant pause she sucked in her lip, met his gaze, and smiled sadly. "What's her name?"

"Marissa," he replied softly.

"Oh," she said as she tucked the errant strands behind her ear. Her expression was unreadable. She was silent for a moment, her focus shifting from him to the pilled cuff of her peacoat. A thin line of worry ran across her forehead. "Kali's going to wake up soon," she said suddenly, shifting her body weight to stand, "I-I should go back."

"Oh. Okay," Mike replied in a cheery voice, thickly attempting to mask his disappointment, "Can we meet tonight, maybe? I'll have more information for you."

El looked up slowly, conflict lacing through her big eyes, "I don't... It's not safe, Mike."

"What?" he asked dumbly, his voice rising in pitch as something painful trilled in his chest, "Well, soon, then?"

"I-I don't know..." El stumbled, her voice starting to shake. She rose from the ground quickly and brushed off her jeans. Mike scrambled up to meet her.

A trigger of heavy desperation shot through his veins without warning. The dormant ache of her absence suddenly roared in his chest as though it had reawoken out of a fitful hibernation. He swallowed thickly, took an adrenalin laced step forward and laid his hands on her shoulders adamantly, "If you walk out that door I won't know how to find you again."

Pain rose through her delicate features and Mike's heart swelled despite every other emotion playing in his body. She was still so incredibly beautiful. Her cheeks now sloped serenely into her full lips, no longer plump with the adolescence he remembered. Her light brown eyes were harder than before, yet were still so alive and starkly intimate as they bore into his own.

"Mike..." she breathed after a moment, her eyes glassing over as she shrugged, "You... Mike, you have a life. And I-I'm happy for you. I

don't want you to mess that up by getting mixed in this again. Everything is a mess. It's not safe."

"You're too late," he said resolutely, shaking his head erratically, "Fuck, this is all so surreal. El, I'm already mixed up in this. I know you didn't ask for it. I know that. But I am and I can help you. I *want* to help you. Hell!" he exclaimed, becoming more emphatic with every word, "I've been involved since the day you left. I've been involved in this since the day we met! I'm already in too deep for safety."

El's body began to shake. He could feel her reverberate through his hands. She closed her eyes as a tear finally escaped and fell down her cheek in the weighty silence.

"I know. But it's more dangerous than you know, Mike, I..." she whispered. Her voice trailed off as she returned her gaze to meet his eye, her demeanor softening as she chewed on her lip in clear internal conflict.

His own eyes began to sting with long restrained tears. He looked at her hopefully, "I haven't given up on you, El."

El's face tightened with emotion, her breath shallow. "Soon," she relented after a long moment. She laid her gloved hand on his arm, "Soon, Mike. I promise. Not yet. It's too dangerous right now for me to even be outside. It seems like you know that," she laughed suddenly, her eyes wide at the concept of the work he had done for her, "I-I shouldn't have even come this morning, but..."

She trailed off as she gestured at him and shrugged. A small tender smile lit up her face as she shook her head, a look akin to awe slipping into her features, revealing the dimple on her left cheek that Mike had missed for so long, "Mike..." was all she said.

Mike stood conflicted as they regarded each other, his wonderment of seeing her again warring with the truth that lied with her walking out of that door. He ached in every way imaginable. He wanted to rage, to tell her all the reasons why his sequester was unnecessary. He wanted to cry and plead and beg her. He wanted to wrap her in his arms and kiss her full on the mouth like he had always dreamed

he would do if this moment ever came.

But instead, he just sighed. "You promise." he confirmed hesitantly.

"I promise," she replied slowly, her eyes burning with weight.

"Shit," Mike cursed softly, brushing away an errant tear as he felt himself acquiesce. He closed his eyes and centered himself with a deep breath. "Can you find me tonight at least?" he asked suddenly, feeling the disappointment sink in, "We can decide on a time and you can find me... in the Void? I'll have stuff you need to know." He shrugged as a bittersweet nostalgic smile rose to his lips, "It'll be like old times."

El's lips crooked up at the words. She nodded, "Like old times... Yes. That works."

"Okay," he said, forcing himself to smile. He squeezed her shoulder reassuringly, "Okay, how about you tune in at 7:15? I'll find out what I can by then and give you an update. And maybe the next day, too? I mean, I bet I'll have regular updates for you and I-I want to help you stay safe."

"Yes," she replied ardently, "7:15. Today and...other days."

It was the best he could do. He knew it. And it felt resolutely inadequate. He had a nauseating sense of déjà vu as he painfully accepted their compromise. Rationally, he knew she was correct, though he truly did not want to listen to reason in this moment, at all. But she was right. It wasn't safe. She was harboring a test subject, after all. He quickly squelched the selfish part of him that couldn't accept the harsh truth of the circumstances and locked eyes with her meaningfully.

"I-I should go," El said quietly, averting her gaze suddenly as she raised her hood. She reached for the doorknob but stopped short and turned back to him, "I should walk out first. I'll make sure its safe then you leave?"

She looked up to him for confirmation and his breath hitched in his throat. His eyes scanned her face in a panicked attempt to imprint

her onto his memory. "I'm so happy to see you." The words slipped out of his mind and through his lips without a filter.

She replied by taking his hand without warning and pulling him deeply into a hug. His arms wrapped around her slight frame one final time. She fit against him in a way that stirred the best memories, each of them hitting him like a dagger as they combined with the overwhelming helplessness of the circumstances.

"7:15," he repeated, his lips brushing against the material of her hood in the ghost of a kiss.

"7 1 5," he felt her say with a chuckle into the crook of his neck. A tear escaped his eye as he laughed; an old joke returning from the recesses of his mind. His arms tightened instinctively around her, as though if he held on tight enough the moment would never end.

"I'll be there. I'll hear you. I promise," she said as she pulled out of his embrace. She looked up to him one final time and nodded reassuringly, as though sealing a pact.

And with that, before he could blink, she slipped out of the door and back into his memory.

---

Jane blinked hard, brushing away a fresh wave of overwhelmed tears. She shook her head in an attempt to clear her mind as she pulled herself tiredly up the stairs of the cavernous warehouse. She needed to get her story straight. This would definitely *not* sit well with Kali, and for good reason. The knowledge of everything Mike had told her, however, warred within her mind. Kali deserved to know what Mike had done. What he *could* do.

Her heart warmed rebelliously at the thought of his years of selfless assistance. How many times had he thrown them off her trail? The fact that Mike might have saved her life, yet again, through some bizarre magic of making information disappear was completely dizzying. Even in her absence he had never ceased to create safety for her.

It was just such a *Mike* thing to do. He was amazing. An amazing... friend. Friend, she reminded herself harshly, as she fought off another rush of embarrassingly naïve disappointment. It wasn't jealousy. All she wanted in the world was for Mike to be happy. He deserved it. But she couldn't deny that a mention of his girlfriend had felt like a wave of cold water splashing over her entire body. Friend, she repeated to herself resolutely, working hard to shake off the feeling of his lips pressed against the top of her head.

Not that it mattered, the chances of her seeing him again any time soon were almost nothing. Another tear ran rogue down her cheek.

However, regardless of the circumstances, the fact that she had simply just *seen* him again was more than her heart could handle.

His smile, though different now that it was traced with a surprising masculine stubble, elicited the same sensation of warmth that it always had. To be in his presence was like returning to a refuge. A bubble of safety within this insane, cruel world.

He was taller now. Broader. She had felt so small against him as he hugged her tightly one final time. Friend. Friend. Friend.

There would be time to process all of that later. For now, she needed to focus. The stakes were too high. She needed to talk to Kali. The Department of Energy was officially on their tail. Kali *needed* to know that, though Jane was completely stumped on how to tell her.

The coffee and donuts in her hand served as the first line of defense.

"Good morning!" She called through the second floor, mustering up every ounce of energy and cheeriness she could, "I have presents!"

Sev appeared first, peering around the corner from the recessed area of her mattress. The small girl's hands were hidden inside the sleeves of an oversized blue sweatshirt of Jane's. She gave Jane a tentative smile. "Present?" she repeated curiously.

"Yes," Jane replied, holding up her bag, "Do you know what a donut is?"

Sev shook her head no, her blue eyes wide. Her little feet pattered

around the corner tentatively to come closer to Jane. Jane motioned for Sev to join her at the makeshift table they had made from piled up wooden pallets.

"They're good. I got you sprinkles," Jane said sweetly as she pulled out a pink glazed pastry dotted in a rainbow of sprinkles. The small girl's eyes shot wide as she looked at the delicate breakfast treat.

"Pretty," she said quietly, her eyes as wide as saucers.

"Very pretty," Jane nodded in agreement. She handed the donut to Sev as she took a seat on a towel laid on the concrete floor, "Kali! I have breakfast!" she called as she unburdened her arms of the coffees and bags she'd been carrying.

Kali appeared thirty seconds later from the hallway on the left, still wrapped in her blanket. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Her hair stuck out in fifty directions, as it did every morning, making her look like a fierce lion.

"You went out?" Kali asked, a hint of suspicion in her tone as she sat on the ratty towel next to Jane. She placed her head tiredly against Jane's shoulder as she reached for a coffee.

"I thought you deserved it," Jane replied cheerily, "You've been working so hard. You need some coffee and breakfast."

"Why do I feel like you're buttering me up for something?" Kali replied with a snicker as she removed the lid from her coffee and blew on it.

If only she knew.

---

Mike laid in his bed in the late morning light, his body begging for sleep as his mind ached in a state of shock. He felt numb. Her face was etched within the screen in his mind. Each nerve in his body attempted to hold onto the sensation of her in his arms.

Though he attempted to fight off his emotions, he couldn't help but



feel that holding her had felt like rewind time. As though for one quick minute he had stepped through a veil back into his lanky and awkward 16 year old body, back into long days of sweeping kisses, shy exploration and the very first vestiges of love. Back into lying on the grass and playing with her curls while she smiled serenely. Back to those two perfect summers they had shared when nothing else mattered, in that beautiful bubble of time when El had been fully safe and able to just *be*. Before Brenner returned and before the new Project ripped away her safety once again. Before she left without warning in the dead of night.

A fit of anger rose in his throat, the newest emotion to join the throng that had assaulted him in the last 24 hours. Anger for the past. Anger for everything that had ever happened to her. Anger for the years he had spent waiting for her. Anger at being put on the sideline yet again, back to radioing her every night while he heard nothing back. He thrashed in his bed and pushed his face into his pillow, growling in frustration.

He knew it wasn't her fault. She wasn't to blame. But nonetheless, a massive cut on his heart, long scabbed over, was wounded fresh, and out poured an unyielding sense of helplessness.

BEEP BEEP

Mike cursed, pushing his eyes shut as a fresh wave of guilt crashed over him. Marissa.

He pulled himself weakly from his bed, sighing as he trudged to the phone hanging on the wall in the kitchen. He numbly pushed her number into the keypad and waited as the ring tone initiated. She picked up on the second ring.

"Mike?!" she exclaimed, causing him to flinch, "Are you okay? I've been paging you since last night. It's not like you, what's going on?"

His lethargic brain realized at the sound of her voice that he had completely not prepared for the phone call. A rush of nervous adrenaline shot through him, "Um... I uh, my beeper battery was dead."

He winced in shame. It was a shitty lie that felt like poison on his tongue. But, what was he supposed to do? How does one explain that their long lost love with super powers who ran away because she was being pursued by a shadowy corner of the government reappeared out of thin air after seven years and was in major trouble and he was helping her though he might never see her again. He couldn't. Though a flat out lie made him feel like 175 pounds of shit.

"Oh, okay," she said with a relieved tone, "Did you fix it?"

"Yeah," he replied shortly.

"How did the meeting go today?" she asked.

"The meeting?" Mike repeated as he rubbed his eyes.

"With your Dad's friend?"

"Oh, Right," Mike replied with a wince as another lie began to spin on his tongue. "It uh... it got postponed."

"Oh, that's too bad. When is it?"

"I uh... I don't know yet..."

"Are you okay?" she asked, her worried tone returning, "You don't sound good."

"I-I'm not feeling well. I think I'm getting sick," he lied lamely as his gut turned to ice, "I'm going to lay back down."

"Okay, yeah you should. Maybe I can bring some soup tonight and we can cuddle up and watch a movie?" she asked encouragingly, "7 o'clock good?"

Mike grimaced, "Uh, sure but... can you make it 8? I have to work a bit tonight."

Marissa groaned. "Mike, why are you doing that illegal shit when you're sick?" she said impatiently. Silence filled the line for a moment before he heard her sigh, "Sorry," she said dully.

Mike shook his head helplessly, absolutely unsure of how to respond. "Is 8 okay?" he asked again, attempting to move on.

"Yeah," she said, her voice sounding far away. A pause existed on the line, the crackling of the connection the only sound. Finally, she spoke again, her tone a bit brighter, "I'll see you then. Feel better, honey."

"Thanks," he replied as the line went dead.

Mike sighed as he ran his fingers through his greasy hair, feeling a little annoyed, a lot guilty, bone aching tired, and emotionally drained. He glanced at the clock as he trudged back to bed. 11:30am. He clumsily crawled back into bed and set an alarm for 4pm. Enough time to get the latest information for El before she tuned in.

This time his body won over his mind, dragging him off to sleep.

## 5. Chapter 5

"WHAT?!"

*Great timing*, Jane thought to herself ruefully as she felt her eyes droop against the mid-day light and the shock on Kali's face. Clearly, her judgment was impaired.

She berated herself as Kali began to pace. Why would she bring it up *now*? And why would she bring it up *like this*? No smooth or well thought out delivery like 'I know someone who can help us,' or 'Let me tell you some great news.' No, nothing clever like that. Instead she had just dropped a simple 'I saw Mike' from her mouth as she fought off sleep during a break from attempting, and failing yet again, to get information out of Sev.

She had to admit though, it wasn't surprising. Mike was all she could think about. All through the morning she had tried to keep a straight face as Sev sat in front of her nervous and unyielding. But throughout it all, Mike had possessed complete residency over her brain. Her mind, overwhelmed with fatigue, was simply allowing his face to float in the dark space behind her eyelids. The visions slipped between the boy she had left and the man she had met at dawn. They toyed with her, pulled her under, and dared her to drown in them. She couldn't shut out his eyes, so much deeper and warmer than she had allowed herself to remember. Or the crook of his lip as he looked up from the dock and saw her face. Or the messy stubble etched along his jaw which only worked, oddly, to make her heart beat faster.

Or everything he knew, and everything he had done for her. Or *Marissa*.

She groaned and slapped her cheek lightly to wake herself up as Kali's face began to turn dangerously angry.

"You're telling me you just happened to 'bump into' your ex boyfriend during the one hour you were outside yesterday, because he happens to *live down the street* in the biggest city in America?" Kali asked, her arms crossing as she began to pace the large room.

"Yes," Jane nodded wearily, "He can help us, Ka-"

"And you don't find that suspicious?!" Kali cut in suddenly.

"Of course I do!" Jane replied defensively as she clumsily rose to her feet, adrenalin bringing her back to her senses, "I'm not an idiot. I made sure it was him. And I didn't tell him anything. Kali, he can hel-"

"You know you can't see him again," Kali said nervously, shaking her head frenetically as she stopped in her tracks.

Jane flinched as a jolt of anger coursed through her, "Not that it's any of your business, but I know that. I'm not going to go see him again. I told him that."

Kali dropped her head into her hands and growled, "It is my business, Jane. We have an unresponsive kid in the other room. Every day she's quiet I have to work harder to protect all of us. I am so tired. I can't do this much longer," she peeked back up slowly, the beginnings of tears forming in her eyes, "It is my business. Every move you make is my business right now."

Jane softened guiltily as she watched the exhaustion and fear rise through her sister's face. She sighed, her shoulders relaxing. "I know. I'm sorry. Kali, I need you to listen to me. Mike can hel-"

"This is fucked up," Kali groaned nervously as she began to pace again. "You're sure? You're sure it was him. This isn't a trick?"

"Yes," Jane replied softly, "I tracked him to make sure, and I questioned him. It was Mike. I promise."

This time Kali did not respond. She merely continued to wear patterns in the dusty floor with her feet as she nervously played with a chunky black bracelet on her wrist.

Jane took a deep breath and stepped closer, "Kali... Mike can help us."

"How is your *high school boyfriend* going to help us?" Kali bit back, her voice dripping with frustration as she rolled her eyes.

"Because he's been breaking into the Department of Energy computer systems for six years erasing documents about us!"

Kali stopped abruptly, a look of dumb wide-eyed shock freezing on her face. The room was silent for a long moment but for the hum and clank of the radiator.

"He knows everything," Jane continued carefully, "He knows their movements. He can help us. He told me... he told me they started looking for us just yesterday. Mike, he um, was up all last night erasing the documentation from everywhere."

"Last night?" Kali questioned severely, "I thought you saw him yesterday? How do you know about last night?"

Jane bit her lip, too tired to lie, "I saw him this morning."

Kali laughed darkly as she shook her head and leaned against the wall, "What are you doing, Jane? You know how dangerous this is."

"He knew about Sev," Jane replied curtly, her voice growing cold.

Kali gasped, her face finally losing any trace of anger, "What?"

"I told you. He knows everything. He can get *inside* the Department of Energy and they don't know he's there. In their computer...servers? From his computer. He called it hacking, I think," Jane stuttered, trying to remember the words.

Kali was quiet for a long while. Jane picked nervously at her nails, her frenetic energy building with no place to go. Kali finally slid down the wall to sit, "Mick... she always talked about how she wanted to learn how to do that. I never knew what she was talking about."

The mention of Mick turned the knife in Jane's chest. She swallowed thickly, "Well... that's what Mike does. And he's doing it for us."

Kali's eyebrows moved in the trademark pattern they made whenever she thought something through, "Okay. Let's say he can help. Which, I am NOT comfortable with, by the way. But let's say he *can*. So, they're after us as of yesterday morning, but Mike... he erased it?"

"Yes," Jane confirmed, nodding fervently, feeling the air in the room ease ever so slightly, "He's going to continue working on it, but he said it spread fast before he caught it so we need to be really careful." Jane twitched nervously as she decided to drop the final bomb, "He's... he's going to feed me information through the Void starting tonight..."

Kali slowly turned to Jane, a knowing, and highly annoyed, look on her face, "Jane, you are playing with fire."

"What else are we supposed to do?!" Jane fumed, her anger finally cresting as her voice rose, "Are we supposed to just sit here and wait for the girl to talk while we waste away? Is that what we're supposed to do? Or should I get any information I can if it's offered?"

Kali put her hands in the air warily. "Jane," she said with a measured and delicate tone, "I understand. You're making sense. It's just that it's... Mike."

"So what?!" Jane barked harshly, "Mike has risked his life to save mine before and he's... he's been doing it without me asking him all this time. He can *help*, Kali." Jane felt her face falter. She slid down the wall, her final stores of energy exhausted. She dropped her head to her knees, "He can help. And we need help."

Jane felt Kali scoot closer and put her arm around her shoulder, "Janie..." she said slowly, "Are you okay?" Her sister's touch worked like a valve behind her eyes. The tears she had held back for hours released as a sudden racking torrent cutting through her body. Kali pulled her in silently and Jane collapsed into her arms.

It was just so much. To feel him. To touch his hand and feel his warmth. To see in his face *how much time* had passed. To hear he had moved on. To know the girl's name. To face everything she had left behind and to walk away yet again, only to have to face his haunted image every night in the Void that existed in her mind.

It felt like hours while the earthquake of pain shot through her, flying out of her eyes.

"Jane..." Kali said softly after a long silence.

"He moved on," Jane hiccuped, the words finally spilling from her mouth. They tasted like poison. Like a long budding curse that had finally come to pass. But upon letting them out she felt her shoulders unclench, a small bit of the weight lifting off as she felt her body accept the truth for the first time. She opened her eyes opened to find herself completely doubled over in her sister's lap. Her bleary eyes focused numbly on the torn cuff of Kali's dark jeans.

"I'm sorry," Kali replied. A kindness radiated from her voice that Jane hadn't heard in so long, "I'm so sorry."

A small flock of vibrant butterflies appeared in Jane's eyesight, floating directly above the floor on the other side of Kali's leg. It was Kali's visual lullaby that had always served as an small antidote to Jane's pain. They dazzled and made Jane's heart bloom, despite the grim sensations coursing through her body, "I love you," Jane said through a choked sob as she clumsily hugged her sister's leg, "I won't mess this up. I promise."

"You better not," Kali said with a dry and teasing voice as she began to braid Jane's long curly hair. "But as much as I don't like Mike Wheeler getting involved, because that boy is your Kryptonite, I do like the idea of a hacker we can trust. So I'm just going to pretend it's not Mike. You should probably do the same or you might lose your mind."

Jane laughed thickly and shook her head, "Sure, I'll try that."

---

Mike awoke slowly, drifting for a long while within the untethered realm between wakefulness and sleep. He buried his face in his pillow, a sleepy smile playing on his lips. He did not want to lose the feeling of her lips on his. Her honey brown eyes obscured by her short black hair as it tickled his cheek before he nuzzled into her neck. Her voice purring against his ear "*Mike...*"

Mike's eyes snapped open, his consciousness becoming rigid and bringing him back to the reality of his bedroom in the fading daylight. He blinked and rubbed his eyes as his racing heart began to slow. He smiled bemusedly. That had been... new.



BUZZ BUZZ BUZZ

He groaned and stretched to turn off his alarm. His fuzzy mind regarded the numbers on the clock with confusion. 4:00 PM. Why did he set his alarm for such a weird time as 4:00PM?

He shot up suddenly in bed and almost fell out, "Holy Fuck, El!"

His breath caught in his throat as the entire morning crashed over him like a wave. It felt like it existed in a dream, but the details were much too clear for that. Mike staggered out of bed, bolted to his computer and got straight to work without a single thought.

After two and a half hours of robotic focus on his computer screen, it became clear that his original sweep seemed to have worked quite well. He had only found two new documents throughout all of the departments. They were easy enough to remove and were direct copies of the ones he had removed the day before. It seemed the Program hadn't caught on quite yet. A burst of pride coursed through his chest.

Mike stretched, looked at the clock and cursed. 45 minutes before his time to report to El. He jumped in the shower quickly, a trill of nervousness shooting down his spine. It had been so long since he had known she was going to listen. Talking to her when he knew she was watching him had always made him incredibly self conscious.

He jumped out of the shower quickly and cleaned himself up, accepting with frustration that there was no time to shave his stubble, which was now verging on a beard. He tried on and tossed off three different shirts before landing on his favorite plaid, feeling like an idiot the whole time as he fitfully debated whether to button it up or leave it open. Roll up the sleeves or leave them down. Who dresses up to talk to the air?

He was finally ready, old trusty Supercomm in his hand. He sat on the bed right on time.

---

*Jane opened her eyes shakily to Mike's voice, clear as a bell in the black of the Void. He sat on a rumpled bed, wearing a dark green plaid shirt*

*with rolled up sleeves that set off his eyes perfectly. His hair was combed, unlike the unruly mop he had sported in the morning. He looked well rested and in a good mood. Jane kept her distance. Friend.*

*"El, Hi. It's 7:15 so I'm checking in like I promised. I hope you're listening. I've got good news. I only found a couple more and they were just like yesterday's so I removed those and there's nothing else. It looks like my original sweep worked pretty well. But stay low, like I said this morning, I'm sure there are still people after you."*

*Mike paused, raising his finger from the Supercomm and listening. Jane bit her lip to stop herself from responding, knowing it was futile. Mike's eyes scanned the room and landed directly upon her. He had always had a bizarre ability to sense her, though she was unsure if he was truly aware of it. A nervous smile played on his lips as he shook his head.*

*"It's so weird to do this again," he said quietly, "I'll check tomorrow and will let you know if I find out anything new. Same time," he paused yet again, taking a deep breath, "I... It was amazing to see you, El." Sadness filling his eyes as he continued to look directly into hers, though truthfully not at all, "Take care, El."*

*Mike pushed the antenna down roughly, stood up, and disintegrated from view.*

---

*"Are you okay?" Kali whispered into her ear as Jane laid in her lap for the second time of the day, tears leaking silently down her face as they mingled with the small trill of blood from her nose. Jane nodded wordlessly.*

*"Are we okay? Any news?"*

*"He did it. No updates. Still sort of safe, sort of in danger," Jane mouthed numbly. She should have felt relieved, but she only felt like an idiot as his quirky smile played over and over again in her mind.*

---

*Mike tossed the Supercomm down onto the bed as he walked to the window, a sick feeling entering his gut. He scanned the bit of skyline viewable from his apartment. Dull grey buildings rose like stains*

against the dull grey sky. She was in one of them.

A light knock echoed on the door. Mike's heart jumped hopefully. He rushed to the door, tossed it open haphazardly, and instantly felt like an asshole. Marissa stood on the other side, her cheeks red and her body bundled up against the cold. A look of surprise played across her face.

"Hi?" she said with a nervous laugh, "You're eager."

Mike stuttered, pulling his mind together as quickly as he could. He had completely forgotten she was coming over, "Hey, come on in. You're... early."

"I know, I'm sorry," she said with a guilty grimace as she edged her way into the room, "I came here after work and I got us dinner and I didn't want it to get cold. I can wait and watch TV while you finish working?"

"No, it's fine," Mike said quickly, forcing a smile, "I-I finished early."

Marissa smiled meekly as she scanned his body, "You look nice. Did you go out? Aren't you sick?"

"Oh," Mike replied in surprise, feeling instantly ashamed, "I just, um, like to look nice when I'm sick? It helps me feel better?"

Marissa nodded, the fib slipping smoothly past her, "Well, you look really nice. You don't look sick at all," she said as a different, hungrier, smile rose to her lips. She rose up on her tip toes and kissed his cheek, "Except for this," she teased, rubbing her hand against his beard, "I like to feel your skin when I kiss you." Her eyes glittered before she turned away and walked to the tiny kitchen table. He watched her as she set down their bag of take out, and worked to unbundle herself from the cold.

She took off her hat and shook out her short hair. *Holy Shit.* It hit him suddenly like a bolt of lightning between his eyes. A lead weight fell into his stomach. Dustin had been right. Mike's girlfriend was a dead ringer for El Hopper.

It was mostly in the eyes. Though Marissa's were blue, she had the

exact same soft almond shape, sloping into a dainty nose. Her hair brushed her cheeks in the exact way El's had earlier that morning. Her face blushed the same way against the cold. Mike groaned, feeling an intense wave of sick self loathing.

"Are you okay?" she asked awkwardly, staring at him as he continued to stand in the open doorway, unmoving with his eyes wide. "You're looking at me like you saw a ghost."

"Maybe I did," Mike replied in an attempt to lighten the mood, but it only sputtered out of his mouth with an air of self-reproach. He jumped to attention and shut the door, "Sorry. Just not feeling well."

The night continued in an achingly slow fashion as Mike's anxiety and shame continued to rise against his breast bone. Marissa was sweet. She was funny, animated. She had brought him soup because he was sick... though he wasn't actually sick. Because he was lying through his teeth about every single thing she asked him. Because he was a piece of shit boyfriend.

"So, does that work?" she asked, pulling him back to reality and out of his spinning mind.

"Does what work?" he asked suddenly, unable to wipe the confusion off of his face.

Marissa sighed audibly and bit her lip. She was silent for a moment before continuing with a slight bite to her tone, "Christmas. Leaving tomorrow at 7:30? Will you be done with work by then?"

"Oh," Mike said, his anxiety coursing to a fever pitch. His mind flew in five directions at once. What was he doing? Was he leading Marissa on? Had he been doing it all along and he just was too thick to realize it? And shit, he couldn't *leave town tomorrow*! It was too dangerous to leave El without information right now. Fuck that, he didn't owe El anything. But fuck that! This didn't have to do with owing her, this had to do with lov-

Marissa deserved so much better than this.

"Yeah, 7:30 tomorrow works," he nodded emphatically as his stomach

attempted to crawl out of his mouth.

"Okay," she replied slowly, apprehension tracing her brows. She regarded him quietly across the small dinner table for a long moment before saying, "Are you okay? Something seems... off"

"No," Mike shrugged as he shifted in his seat, his face growing hot, "Just still a little sick is all."

She didn't buy it this time. "Is this about Christmas? Do you not want to go?" she pushed, the edge in her voice becoming sharper.

"No, not at all," Mike replied decisively.

"Okay..." she said after a moment, her eyes still narrow as she studied his face. "Work maybe?" she asked. Mike did not reply right away. Suddenly, she gasped as she leaned back, her voice rising scoldingly with every word, "Did something happen? You need to stop doing all of this, Mike. You have other options. Good paying ones. I know you don't like me talking about it but you're going to get caught. You should - "

"Stop Marissa. Nothing happened, I'm just sick!" he groaned loudly, his frustration cresting as he pushed himself up from the table. He instantly regretted it and forced himself to look back down at her. Marissa's blue eyes were wide, nervous. Her arms were crossed over her chest in a protective manner as her body shrunk against the chair, "Shit, I'm sorry. I just... I... can we just watch a movie or something? I'm sorry."

Marissa nodded slowly as her body loosened, "If something's wrong you'd tell me, right?"

"Yes," he sighed, "Nothing's wrong."

Everything was wrong.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

The angst coursing through these babies right now is just so painful to write. I just want to hug them both right about now.

## 6. Chapter 6

She found it deep in the bottom of her travel bag, untouched since long before they had arrived in New York. The pink bag was grimy, greyed and smudged from long years of overuse. She unzipped it methodically and dug through the contents with numb fingers, finally finding the small rectangle mirror encased in vibrant pink plastic. A hairline crack ran down its center, jaggedly bisecting her reflection. A ratty sticker of a rainbow shooting from a cloud, labeled '*Nancy*', was wedged in the top corner. A hand me down from a past life.

Jane sighed as she set it carefully against the dusty window sill, shivering against a draft that cut through the single pane windows. Piece by piece she carefully laid out her makeup. It had been so long since she had unpacked the bag, but that did not stop it from feeling like a religious habit. She fingered the dark smudge pencils she had spent so many years hiding behind. They felt like old friends lying in her fingers.

Jane sniffed as she looked in the mirror. Her face was bare, as it had been for much of the last two years. Her eyes were puffy and red-lidded from too many tears. Flecks of sleep were caked upon their outer creases. Her cheeks were pallid with small splotches of pink. Her lips were chapped and bitten. She picked up her smudge pencil, twirled it through her fingers, and got to work.

After fifteen minutes of dedicated work, she breathed a sigh of relief at her reflection in the mirror, her tear stained face now obscured in a coat of armor. Black eyelids and black lashes, set off with a soft cat eye and dark brows. Dark lips and shadowed cheeks. A small smile of relief brushed over the lips, feeling for the first time in two days a little more contained.

She stood up and peeled off her heavy grey sweater, causing a snag as her necklace caught a loose thread. "Shit," she murmured as she worked clumsily to untangle the wool from the metal links. The sweater finally fell to the floor, leaving just the necklace between her fingers. Her containment threatened to loosen as she regarded the thin silver chain, a simple diamond ring hanging from the end. She froze in place, her heart beating painfully as the small etched letters

inside the band caught the daylight.

### *"Promise"*

It wasn't something she thought about often. It was simply a part of her, always there against her chest as she moved through the world. But suddenly, the weight of it felt heavy upon her neck. She swallowed hard as she ran it through her fingers, the sudden urge to take it off overwhelming her. Jane bit her lip, closed her eyes tightly and took a deep breath as the links continued to thread through her fingers, stopping as the ring slipped onto the tip of her forefinger. She let the necklace drop back against her chest and shuddered.

She rummaged quickly through her bag and slipped on a tight black sweater, pulled on ripped black jeans and her laced up her trusty combat boots with the thickest socks she could find. She picked up her blond wig and carefully ran her shaky fingers through the strands as her mind worked to focus on something other than the cold metal against her breastbone.

The blonde wig, combat boots, black eyes, dark lips shot her back to her 21st birthday. It had coincided with a rare few months when the gang had felt safe enough to explore Philadelphia without too much worry. She had worn the same blond wig out to shows and bars every night for three weeks around the city, head banging to loud music, drinking shitty beer with Mick and Axel, feeling for the first time in so many years like she could just *be*. It had been the happiest she'd been in years.

She bit her lip to control the tear that threatened to spill and smudge her makeup as she slipped the wig on over her tightly pinned hair. She turned to the small mirror and spied herself one last time. A shiver laced through her body as she took herself in. The black outfit worked as a barrier against everything she felt. The painful spot in her chest eased just a bit. Satisfied, she scooped up her materials and tucked them carefully into their old satchel before returning it to her travel bag and tucking it safely back at the bottom.

Finally, after searching through her bag so long that she was worried that she might have lost it, she pulled out her old black leather jacket. It was scrunched and musty from misuse. She shook it out and

slipped it on. She dug into the pocket and smiled sadly as she pulled out Dottie's old beat up pair of black fingerless gloves. They would be almost useless in this weather. She put them on anyway. Jane took a deep breath, the cold air hitting her lungs sharply, as she let the feeling wave over her.

Nothing else was going to hurt her today.

The air was bitter. The wind had picked up over the night as winter fully arrived in New York City. It had taken her the entire morning to finally pull herself out of the cocoon she had made herself in the corner by the single radiator they had luckily been able to make work.

Her boots echoed off of the cavernous walls as she crossed the warehouse floor to Sev's mattress. It was well after noon and the girl was still in bed, much like she had been every day since she had arrived.

"Sev. Wake up," she stated commandingly as she reached her. The girl awoke with a start and looked up, her eyes widening fearfully at Jane, hardly recognizing her behind the makeup. Jane kneeled down, her elbows leaning against her knees. "We're talking today," she stated plainly, leaving no room in her voice for negotiation. "I've been patient for days. I'm not patient anymore. Do you understand?"

Nervousness traced through the girl's eyes. Guilt triggered somewhere deep within Jane's gut, but it wasn't strong enough to counteract the fact that the girl was literally bleeding Kali's powers dry.

"Do you understand?" Jane repeated slowly.

The girl had not blinked throughout the entire interaction. Her bright blue eyes connected with Jane's black rimmed brown ones. She was still for a moment but eventually nodded, slowly. The girl swallowed hard, "Yes?"

"Good. Let's get started."

---

"Three?"



"Yes, three," Jane replied, her excitement radiating through her toes, causing her to bounce.

Kali nodded and surveyed her with amusement, "And what are they like?"

"Sev says they're bad men. She was the only kid. One is telekinetic. Not a tracker, though." Jane paused for effect, "Kali, Sev was their only tracker."

"Really?" Kali gasped as she sat straight up. Jane nodded slowly, her lips widening. "Holy shit. That's amazing!"

"Yeah! Get a good night's sleep tonight. You can relax," Jane replied as her smile broke full upon her lips.

Kali let out a large breath, collapsed back onto the mattress and laughed, "I officially forgive you for bringing the girl here. If we stole their only tracker this has all been worth it."

"We're so close, Kali," Jane said as she flung herself on the mattress beside her sister.

"Seems like it," she breathed. The sisters sat in silence for a moment, a cloud lifting off of their moods.

"Okay, so the first one is like you?" Kali replied, jotting notes in a tattered composition notebook.

"Yes, it seems that way," Jane said as she propped herself up on her elbow facing Kali. "The other two are split with your powers. One can just do concealment."

"Which is why we can't find the facility," Kali added with a nod.

"Yes. The other is a planter."

"Ah," Kali replied, apprehension entering her face, "Is it weird we haven't heard from him yet? Have you had any weird visions like last time?"

Jane thought for a moment, "No, I don't think so. Without their

tracker he's pretty useless against us, and she only tracked us in the Void a few days before we helped her escape."

Kali chewed on the end of her pen thoughtfully, "Does Sev have any fondness for any of these men?"

Jane let her body land back on the mattress and stretched her arms, "I think she's like me. Born into it. So while I don't think she does I can't say for sure. She doesn't remember her Mama, Kali. Only Papa. Honestly, I think she was my replacement. The timing is right. Everything seems similar."

Kali hummed in response as she flipped around on the mattress and leaned down. She made a few final notes in her notebook before shutting it and laying her head by her sister's. "Good work," she said as she patted Jane on the arm. "Thanks for scaring her into talking."

Jane snorted sarcastically, "I didn't scare her, I just made it clear she had no choice. And yeah, great information except we still don't know where to find them or what to do once we're inside."

"Well," Kali said as she toyed with the ends of a few stray strands of her dark hair, "At least we know I can stop concealing us so we have time to figure it out."

Jane shook her head, "I'm not done for the day. I'm finishing this."

"Ambitious," Kali replied in surprise. "What are you going to do, torture her next?"

Jane scoffed, "Oh please, just because I got firm with her doesn't mean I'm a monster. I told her I'd get her a treat if she told me about the Projects, and then another treat if she tells me more about Papa and the building. I'm going to run to the store on the corner and get her donuts. I think I got her addicted. Do you want anything?"

"Do you really think you should go out?" Kali replied apprehensively.

"It's one block. I'll only be gone ten minutes," Jane said with rolled eyes as she brushed off her sister's question. "Do you want anything?"

Kali sighed, "Ice cream?"

"How can you eat ice cream right now? It's freezing!" Jane exclaimed with a laugh.

Kali shrugged as she stood. "Which means the ice cream will stay frozen without a refrigerator. A luxury I never have! You have to look on the positive side, Janey. We are living in an ice box. We might as well take advantage of it. Plus, I need to celebrate."

Jane chuckled darkly as she stood up and shoved her cold exposed into her jacket pockets, "Well, I'm glad you're in a good mood. You deserve it."

"I do!" Kali cooed as she rose from the mattress and pulled her sister into a playful hug, "And I'm happy to have my little punk back," she teased as she draped an arm around Jane's leather clad shoulder, "I missed you like this. You look so cute."

"Wasn't going for cute..." Jane replied in annoyance as she shrugged off her sister's arm and reached for her wallet.

"All the same." Kali replied casually, "Mint chocolate chip, please!"

The trip to the corner store was uneventful other than the five minutes she endured the cashier attempting to flirt with her, stalling to give her change until she gave him her number. Which clearly, she did not. Sometimes it was so difficult to not use her powers on the common man.

The last vestiges of daylight dropped out of the sky as she made her way back into the building through the alley door, ready for another round of questioning.

---

Mike peeked at his watch. 6:50PM. He groaned and rubbed at his eyes.

He had been a king of procrastination all throughout the day. He worked through the past hours in his mind, trying to figure out how it had gotten so late. Granted, he *had* slept until 1pm. Then there was the two hours he had spent mindlessly watching Edward Scissorhands, and then the other two hours he had spent mindlessly

watching Terminator.

Which somehow led him to the current moment as the anxiety he had been working all day to ignore roared fresh throughout his chest. There was no more time left to avoid it.

He pushed himself up begrudgingly from his desk chair and lumbered over to his dresser. It was painfully empty, he realized with a frown. It was going to be such a good look, showing up to meet his new girlfriend's family with a pile of dirty clothes to wash. He sighed and kicked the dirty laundry strewn across the floor as he ran his hands through his unwieldy hair. The unease in his chest grew steadily with each breath. It felt as though he was trying to run in the wrong direction with a hook pulling at his rib. He sighed and gave into his gut as his feet led him back to his computer. His body sat him down. His fingers began their nightly work one last time.

The process was the same as always, taking the short series of moments and the memorized set of algorithms to earn entry into the poorly secured server. He searched as thoroughly as he could, grimacing in bleak anticipation of having to tell El he couldn't help for a few days.

He moved through the files easily, relieved as they showed, yet again, to be empty. Until -

12/20/93 6:59PM

\*\*\*CLASSIFIED\*\*\*

*Successful match located for perpetrator 011, kidnapping suspect, armed and extremely dangerous. Suspect witnessed at Tony's Liquor and Convenience at 682 11th Avenue at 5:17PM. Suspect seen entering backdoor of 606 W 49th Street at 11th Avenue. SWAT has been engaged to address and is en route. Likely in company with perpetrator 008 and kidnapped 017. Lethal force permitted on all. Photo Attached.*

Mike's shaky fingers clicked against the photo file as his stomach flipped. Two pixelated images, both clearly El, appeared on his screen. They were taken from separate security footage. The first in a sterile hallway, the second in a convenience store. Blonde hair, dark

makeup and a stormy facial expression stared back at him from each separate picture. "Photo from File" was written below the first photo, a perfect match to the security photo staring at him on the right.

"Photo from File"

A photo he had somehow missed.

"FUCK!" He screamed as his fist bashed into his desk. His heart smashing against his chest as though it were trying to escape. He looked at his watch frantically. 7:13PM. He said a prayer hoping she was listening early.

"El- El, please be listening," He barked to the air, not even bothering with the Supercomm sitting on his desk. His hands were shaking too much to make it work, anyway. "El, listen to me: You need to leave NOW. They know where you are. SWAT is on their way to your place NOW. At...606 W 49th. Is that where you are? If that's where you are YOU NEED TO LEAVE! NOW!"

Mike shot up from his seat and began to pace as his mouth worked to relay the information. "Someone saw you at some convenience store and matched it to a photo they had of you in the same wig. I don't know how they got it."

He swallowed, his mind moving into hyperdrive. The words tumbled out of his mouth before he could think about them, "Find me where I am right now. COME HERE. I can keep you guys safe."

Mike's stomach heaved as he repeated the message over and over, raving it into thin air like a madman on a dangerous rant. The notice said 6:59. Hopefully there was time. Time for her to- Time to not -

His body was sweaty and his hair grew more insane as he clung to it in his ramping helpless panic. The minutes dragged on painfully and he grew more frantic with each repetition, unaware of how much time had passed. He would talk for hours if he needed to.

Though there was no way for her to respond, the silence caused his helplessness to rise into abject frustration. He could almost feel her hesitation through the dimensions. Her protectiveness. Her

stubbornness. He growled as the final threads of his sanity let loose.

"Before you tell yourself that you can't come here because you're trying to keep me safe or some *stupid shit* like that, just- just don't! Get here now. I understand exactly what I'm getting myself into. Please, Eleven, get out of that place and find me here. Please!"

Suddenly, his door swung open. Mike jumped a foot in the air, "E-Oh..."

Marissa stood in the doorway, bundled up against the bitter cold outside, her travel bag in her hand. Shock played on her face, "Mike?"

Mike froze in place as every gear in his mind came to a grinding halt. He stared blankly at the woman in the doorway, a cognitive dissonance playing over his every thought. He felt her eyes rake up and down his disheveled body.

"What's going on?" she asked tensely, "Are you even packed? We have to get our bus in 45 minutes."

"I-" he stuttered, bile rising in his throat as he saw the look in her eye. "I... can't go..."

The words came out of his mouth as a revelation. A realization of the truth. An anxiety in his chest eased. He never could have gone.

"I can't go."

Marissa stood in silence for a moment, her eyes wide. "What do you mean *you can't go*?"

Mike shrugged helplessly, guilt pouring through his veins as her face went dark, "I can't go."

"This is how you're going to do this?" she snapped suddenly, surprising him as something that had been simmering at the back of her eyes for days came to the forefront for the first time. A dark self deprecating laugh exited her lips, "You're dumping me on the way to meeting my parents? That's low, Mike."

Was he?

The answer from his gut cried 'yes'.

Mike cringed.

A cold mask materialized on Marissa's face as she looked away, her eyes glistening, "You know, you could have done this yesterday. I knew something was up. I'm not an idiot, Mike! You've been acting so fucking weird lately. But *TODAY?*"

"I'm sorry," the words spilled from his lips without thought. He worked hard to make sense of the situation but it was all moving too fast for his panic addled mind to keep up.

"You're not even going to come up with an excuse?" she asked coldly, her head cocked to the side in determination.

Mike tried to make his mouth work, but nothing came out.

She stalled in the doorway, her eyes getting glassier with every breath.

"This is bullshit," she bit harshly as she shook her head in disbelief. She stood defiantly silent for a moment, daring him to speak. He said nothing.

"Fuck you, Mike." she hissed. She turned around and stormed back into the hallway, leaving the door ajar.

Mike stood stunned as he listened to her foot falls echo against the metal steps. Her voice called out a fraught '*excuse me*' through the stairwell. A part of him urged him to catch her, but his feet would not move.

He steeled his nerves as her footsteps began to ring back up the stairs, coming closer to his door in a panting trod, "Marissa, I - " he called, but his voice died in his throat as a figure appeared in his doorstep.

The girl from the picture stared back at him. Her black rimmed eyes were wide. Her dark lips were slightly open, blood pooling on the top lip as her chest expanded with heavy breaths. Tufted brown hair, flecked with snowflakes, was pinned tightly against her scalp. A

blonde wig stuck haphazardly out from her jacket pocket.

The monster erupting in his chest bloomed into relief.

She stepped cautiously into his apartment.

"You saved my life."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thanks for reading all! This is probably going to move faster now that I'm to the part I really really want to write. Comments and Kudos are my fuel.



## 7. Chapter 7

Jane groaned as she sat down on the mattress next to her sister. She pulled the ends of her jacket over her fingers and shivered against the cold.

"Are you ready?" Kali asked as she spooned a final bite of ice cream into her mouth and sealed up the container.

"No," Jane sighed in reply. Her stomach felt raw and painful, the anxiety of entering the Void ebbing against her ribs. For possibly the first time in her life, Mike Wheeler's face was the last thing she wanted to see.

Kali ran her hand reassuringly against her sister's back. "It'll be fine. He'll probably have nothing to say so it'll take twenty seconds and then we can move on with our night."

"I know," Jane replied begrudgingly as she picked up her Walkman. Her hands shook as she slipped the headphones over her ears and fingered the dial to an empty channel. She hesitated, swallowed hard and closed her eyes.

*Mike appeared instantly, his voice shockingly clear.*

*His dark eyes were wide and ghostly. His voice cracked from the intensity of the words that were spilling from his mouth. His hair was disheveled, his beard scruffier than before, and his clothing mussed. He sat at attention in a desk chair and spoke directly to the air.*

*"-know where you are. SWAT is on their way to your place NOW. At...606 West 49th. Is that where you are? If that's where you are YOU NEED TO LEAVE! NOW!"*

*Every muscle in her body clenched in alarm as she froze in the black. Mike shot up from his seat and paced away from her frantically.*

*"Someone saw you at some convenience store and matched it to a photo they had of you in the same wig. I don't know how they got it."*

*Jane's stomach dropped like lead.*

*Mike turned on his heel and paced back in her direction, his eyes burning directly through her.*

*"Find me where I am right now. COME HERE. I can keep you guys safe."*

Jane gasped as her eyes popped open. The air in the room suddenly felt toxic, too heavy, dripping with danger. They were close. Very close. She could feel it in her bones.

She whipped her eyes to Kali, but her sister was already on her feet, her travel bag at the ready. Her face was ashen and her eyes full of questions.

"Get the girl," Jane commanded as she jumped to her feet. "Meet me at the back. SWAT. They might already be here."

Kali disappeared in a blur around the corner. Jane darted to her travel bag, wrestled her Walkman and headphones off of her head, dumped it in, zipped it up in a flurry and tossed it onto her back.

It was a rule. A rule made precisely for this moment. Nothing was ever fully unpacked. She thanked her foresight as she shot through the cavernous space to the back door.

She halted abruptly as she neared the back door. Heavy echoing footfalls suddenly became audible deep within the stairwell. Too many feet echoed for her to count. She turned back around to see Kali as she appeared from the corner with the girl, dragging her in tow. She rushed to her sister's side.

"But MIKE!" Sev yelled, visibly terrified as she attempted to push Kali's hands off of her arm.

"We can get you another bear! Come on," Kali demanded, but the girl was too strong. She seemed to use a bit of her powers to knock herself out of Kali's grip and darted back into the the recessed corner where she had slept.

"Fuck!" Kali cried as she shook the pain from her hand and looked up to Jane in shock.

"Front door!" Jane cried as she passed Kali and followed the young

girl. The echo of boots grew louder with each passing second, making the room feel like a ticking time bomb. She whipped around the corner and found Sev cuddled with the bear and pushed up against the wall at the back of the mattress. Her eyes were wracked with fear.

"You have to come with us or they'll take you back. Please," Jane whispered frantically.

Tears began to fall from the young girl's ice blue eyes.

"Come on," Jane growled a final time as she stalked toward the girl, "Or I will move you myself."

The girl finally relented, a piece of her shock shifting within her just enough to allow her limbs to work again. She shot up and grabbed Jane's hand, her bear tucked tightly against her chest. As if on cue, Kali turned on her heel and dashed toward the front stairwell.

Jane and Sev ran as fast as they could through the cavernous room, coming to the front doors just as they heard the back doors crash open, causing the large labyrinthine space to vibrate with the sounds of a small army of boots.

Kali reached the front entrance, stopped abruptly and cursed before she backed up and looked back to Jane with alarm. Significant movement could be heard from that stairwell, too.

"Plan C," Kali breathed just loud enough for Jane to hear her as she darted back through a recessed hallway of the floor. Jane groaned, tugged on Sev's arm and followed.

They rounded the corner into a thin hallway and caught up with Kali right as the throng of SWAT officers rounded the corner into the main space. Jane could not be sure if they had been spotted or not. Kali stopped at a large window and looked expectantly at Jane.

"Ready?" Jane whispered.

Kali replied with a curt nod.

"I need you to be silent, Sev. It's going to be okay," Jane breathed into

the small girl's ear as she pulled her tightly against her body. Kali wrapped her arms around Jane's back, creating a single unit.

Jane looked to the window. It shattered in an instant.

She pulled all of her strength to her core and plummeted the trio out of the third story window into the bitterly cold night. It was a practiced maneuver that Kali and Jane had trained for, but not one she had been prepared to do with a third body, or through frigid air, or with a landing location that was occupied by an alarmingly large throng of police on the street below.

The winter wind bit her every cell as she worked to drop the girls as carefully as she could. Their bodies spun dizzily through the air. All the while Sev cried silently against her chest. Kali grappled to remain attached.

Twenty or more police cars and trucks lined the street as they fell, lying in wait for them to make a single bad move. They were outnumbered in a way she had never before experienced. Fear roiled through Jane as she lowered them the final few feet into what felt like a bear's den.

Kali's efforts seemed to be working, however. The window was still visibly intact as far as the eyes of the bystanding authorities could tell, and their bodies landed undetected on the cracked sidewalk beside the warehouse.

Kali disengaged herself from Jane as lightly as a ballerina. The girls wordlessly glanced at each other, an unseen entity within a sea of police.

Kali looked rough. Her eyes were bloodshot. The skin was darkening and blood had begun to spurt from her second nostril. Concealing for so many eyes was stretching her dangerously thin.

Jane's head spun dangerously as her power receded and her body felt the drain of the effort. She steeled her nerves against the discomfort and looked down at Sev. The girl's eyes were wide with terror. A small trickle of blood traced down her own delicate lip for reasons of which Jane was not aware. Jane brought a finger to her lips to

remind her of the necessary silence. Sev nodded shakily and tightened her grip on Jane's hand, Mike the Bear still pulled snug against her.

The sidewalk was a littered minefield of police, as close as three feet away from them. They whispered in their walkie talkies, their shotguns in their hands as they waited impatiently for a moment in which they were provoked to use them.

Jane closed her eyes and breathed. A sensation, akin to a magnet, pulled her south. For the first time since she had heard Mike's warning she truly considered where she was taking them. She forced herself to brush it off quickly. They had no better option. Her mood turned grim for reasons that had nothing to do with their escape.

Nonetheless, she nodded to her right and Kali asked no questions as she led the way. Their footfalls were non-existent and they each held their noses to stop the blood from hitting the pavement as they crept between three throngs of police and reached the corner of 48th Street. Jane nodded forward once they traversed between two police cars and a SWAT van parked at the corner. Once on the next block they picked up the pace. Jane peeled off her offending wig as she walked. It was sticky with Kali's blood from when her face had been pushed against Jane's hair during the fall. She shoved it roughly into her jacket pocket.

"What the hell!?" a shocked voice suddenly echoed from behind them after they were about a block away. Jane jumped and pulled Sev along with her faster.

"They can see the window now," Kali croaked as she swayed dangerously on her feet. Jane caught her by the lapels of her jacket and looked her directly in the eye.

"Pull up your reserves and you can sleep for a week. I promise. We have... eight blocks to go," she breathed insistently, looking behind her as the crowd of police officers began to fan out in all directions, entirely confused by the circumstances of the suddenly appearing broken window. Kali nodded slowly, closed her eyes, and breathed in deeply.

"Where?" Kali whispered as she began to walk faster down the street.

"Where do you think?" Jane replied retorically, a glum tone playing in her voice.

Kali sighed, "I guess it's the only option. You better be right. It better be safe."

"I am," Jane stated nervously.

The three girls moved undetected behind the veil of Kali's powers, block by block, as snow began to fall from the sky. Sev gasped, her eyes wide with surprise as small white flecks fell upon her eyelashes for the first time in her life. Jane pulled her along, no time to explain.

The magnetic sensation that pulled her toward their destination became stronger with every step she took and with it warring emotions grew terribly within her chest. There's no other choice, she told herself repeatedly as they crossed one final street. She steadied her breath as the grey building she sought came into view.

Kali sagged more dangerously than she had seen her in years. Jane caught her as she stumbled over a cracked bit of sidewalk. "One more minute, then you're done," she whispered encouragingly as she worked to support Kali's weight. Kali nodded slowly and pushed her feet along. They passed one building, two buildings, three buildings, and finally, they arrived.

Jane popped the lock to the thick metal doors and wasted no time dragging her sister inside.

"Safe?" Sev asked as the door closed behind them. Her frail body was shivery as a light coat of snow dusted her cropped hair.

"Almost," Jane whispered as she took in the surroundings of the entryway. It was like no warehouse she had ever seen. Structurally, it was very similiar to so many of the warehouses she had known but this place was... nice? Well kept? Odd.

A staircase laid off to the right. Jane spotted a recessed space beneath the steps. She dragged her sister into the darkness under the stairs and propped her carefully against the wall in the shadows. Kali could

not have done an ounce more work if she'd wanted to. Her nostrils and ears were bursting with blood. The rims of her eyes were blue and black. She breathed as though she were sleeping.

"Sev, sit here," Jane said as she pointed directly next to Kali. Sev obeyed and scrambled up against the wall. "Kali just saved us," Jane continued, "So I need you to watch out for her, okay? You're in charge until I get back. If anyone finds you under here you call out. And if they try to hurt you, use your powers. Keep Kali safe. I'll be back in a minute."

Sev nodded vigorously. Her eyes were wide and trauma ebbed within them, but she seemed more committed to obey Jane than she ever had before. Jane smiled quickly and tousled the hair on the girl's head much as her father had done to her when she'd been in Sev's position. She brought her finger up to her lips one last time and nodded a confirmation to the small girl.

Without another word, Jane pulled herself up from the concrete floor and made her way to the stairs. Her heart began to beat vigorously for a completely different reason. She moved as quickly as she could, but her body ached like a full body hangover. She pulled herself up using the banister, step by step.

*"You're not even going to come up with an excuse?"*

Her eyes widened in surprise as a female voice echoed through the stairwell. "Shit," Jane cursed as she brought her hand to her face to obscure the offending blood that was now caking against her lip. She pushed the blonde wig deeper into her pocket and pulled herself up the next set of steps.

*"This is bullshit."*

Act normal, move normal, she told herself as she continued to climb.

*"Fuck you, Mike."*

Jane gasped and halted in her tracks on the landing at the echoing words, suddenly much more interested in the conversation than the climb. Frantic footsteps began to trod down the steps. A young

woman with short brown hair appeared around the bend. Jane pulled herself up the stairs in an attempt to not draw attention to herself. The woman stopped short, inches from bumping into Jane.

"Excuse me," she choked out as she attempted to get around her. Jane looked up as she moved out of the woman's way. Her wide blue doe eyes were laced with heavy tears as she looked away and rushed down the stairs. Her sobs echoed off the concrete as she disappeared.

A dangerous question suddenly played through Jane's mind. She took a deep breath, her heart busting against her chest, and hoisted herself up the remaining flights of stairs, faster this time. As fast as she could muster. She rounded the final curve and shot into the hallway.

A door hung open on her right. Her feet dragged in its direction.

"Marissa, I – "

Jane tried to stop short but it was too late. She was already in the doorway.

Mike stood a few feet from the door, completely alone in a dim loft. His voice abruptly stopped as his eyes landed on her, suddenly shooting open wide with shock. She watched as his stunned expression melted and a surprised smile rose to his lips. Jane's breath hitched painfully in her chest.

After a long moment, she took a tentative step into the room.

"You saved my life."

Mike crossed the space between them in two long strides without hesitation and she all but collapsed into his arms. He wrapped around her tightly, cradling her head against his chest and lacing his other arm up against her shoulder blades. Her legs began to feel weak as she leaned against him, finally in safety.

"Oh my God, El. You scared the shit out of me," His voice ached with relieved panic as his words vibrated off the top of her scalp. "Are you okay?"

She replied shakily, her voice muffled against his chest. "It was an



ambush. I don't think we would have all made it without your warning." She looked up and met his eye, her voice quivering, "Thank you."

"Yeah," he breathed in return as he looked back at her with a small smile. His chest rose and fell heavily against her as he breathed. Something in his eyes caused a warmth to spread through her body that made her own eyes flutter shut with relief.

She caught herself quickly.

"The others!" she cried as she pulled away from him suddenly. "I need your help. Downstairs. Kali is too drained to walk."

Mike pulled away and pushed up his sleeves. "Yeah, let's go."

"Wait," she stopped as sane thoughts returned to her mind. She quickly surveyed his apartment. "You're sure its safe for us to be here? You're alone?"

"Completely safe," he replied reassuringly as he crossed through the doorway and beckoned for her to follow. "My only neighbor on this floor is gone until after New Years so there won't be anyone at all for a couple of weeks. If, you know, you want to stay. Which, you are totally welcome. And your sister."

"Okay..." Jane stuttered.

Mike smiled cautiously and began to move toward the stairwell.

Her mind jogged awkwardly as she followed him. A nervous trill twisted through her chest and she gulped. She had to ask. It was important for their safety, after all, she rationalized quickly.

"And your girlfriend, she isn't... here? You said her name right when I..."

"Oh that," Mike interjected awkwardly as he stopped and turned back to her. "Um..." He scratched his neck and averted his eyes for a second before he looked back at her sheepishly. "She just left."

The twist in her chest coiled tighter, making her supremely regret the

question. Mike paused as he looked at his feet. He took a deep breath and looked back up to her, his voice now incredibly soft. " And uh... She's not coming back. Probably ever."

"Oh," Jane breathed, her eyes wide as her heart stopped.

He shook his hair out of his eyes and fumblingly pointed to the stairwell. "Should we - "

"Yes," Jane said quickly. She shed her backpack to the floor of the hallway and followed Mike onto the stairs.

They made their way down as quickly as they could, Mike helping Jane every so often as her energy levels struggled to keep up. They finally reached the lobby after a couple of minutes.

"Stay here. I have to tell Sev about you first," she instructed.

Mike nodded and leaned against the bannister to wait. Jane scurried around the staircase to the dark recess below the steps. Kali was still passed out, the level of her over exertion apparent in the blood coagulating on the outside of her ears. Sev was scrunched against the unconscious woman. She held the bear to her chest like a shield.

"Hi Sev," Jane said with a soft tone, "You okay?"

The girl nodded carefully.

"Good," Jane said with a comforting smile. "I have a friend I want you to meet. He's going to help us. We're safe here, okay? I promise."

"Okay," the small girl croaked.

"Mike - " Jane called out in a hushed whisper, "Can you come here?"

"Mike?" the girl said suddenly in surprise, her eyes wide. She looked down to the bear and back up to Jane.

Jane felt a blush creep onto her cheeks as she whispered hurriedly back at the girl, "Um... that's his secret name? Don't tell Mike, ple-"

Her request to Sev was cut off short as Mike's footsteps got too close.

Mike ducked under the stairwell and crouched down beside Jane in front of Sev.

"Sev, this is Mike," Jane introduced.

"Hi Sev, nice to meet you," he said kindly as he held out his hand to shake the young girl's. Sev regarded it with suspicion before she slowly inserted her small hand into his clutch.

"Are you doing okay?" he asked, his eyes intent and gentle as he spoke to the girl.

Sev nodded. She looked at the bear, looked at Mike, and looked back at the bear, confusion still knitting her eyebrows.

"Sev. Can you walk?" Jane asked, distracting the girl to another topic as quickly as she could. Sev nodded, rose to her feet and took Jane's hand gingerly. Jane shouldered Kali's bag from the floor and crossed a few steps to the edge of the shadowed area.

"Can you carry Kali?" she asked Mike. "I don't think she's going to wake up for awhile. She had to work really hard to get us out of there."

"Of course," Mike said as he crouched down and began to position Kali to lift her from the ground.

"Oh, a warning," Jane said as she ducked back under the stairwell to address Mike, "If you see any weird things crawling on you or about to attack you while you're carrying her, just ignore it. She might mess with your mind if she wakes up since she doesn't know who you are."

Mike's face blanched. "Okay? Um... thanks for the warning?"

Jane nodded and chuckled. She took Sev's hand and led her slowly up the stairs.

The shock of the evening began to set in as she climbed the steps a final time. She gripped the young girl's hand tighter as Mike's labored breathing echoed off the walls in the stairwell, Kali in his arms. Mike's door was still ajar when they reached the sixth floor. It was an open room, concrete walling it in in every direction. The room was

sparsely furnished. A few old rugs were strewn across the cold concrete floor. Movie posters, some she recognized from his old bedroom, as well as many new ones, were tacked onto the grey walls behind the bed. A large desk that contained the most intricate computer system she had ever seen sat off to the right, and a cork board with pinned notices and old movie tickets littered the wall above it. Streetlight spilled in from a huge uncovered window overlooking 12th Avenue and the Hudson River, spreading light into the otherwise poorly lit room.

It was nothing like the room she anticipated Mike to live in. It actually looked more like the dwellings she was used to, but with nicer furniture, a computer system, and, she noticed with a smile, a television.

Jane worked slowly to get Sev ready to rest. She dug out fresh clothes for the girl and found the bathroom in order to help Sev clean up her face. When complete, she brought Sev back out into the main room. There, she found Mike sitting in a chair beside his bed cleaning blood from Kali's face as she laid asleep under a quilt.

*The quilt*, Jane realized with a sharp intake of breath. *From the blanket fort.*

Memories assaulted her at the sight of it. Mike had stubbornly refused to take the fort down the entire time she had known him. The space had become more and more cramped with each passing year as he had shot up in height, but that had never slowed down his fondness for pulling her into the fort on lazy Saturdays or afternoons after school.

She bit her lip to quell the sudden wave of emotions that racked through her. As she watched Mike attend to Kali, her body now under the same quilt that Jane herself had slept under during her very first night of freedom, she felt a faint voice calling in her chest. At it's beckoning, Jane's body rooted deeply into the reality that surrounded her. The intensity of the sensation made her gasp. It was like a glass of water after a lifetime in the desert. It was terrifying and exhilarating. At the same time so welcome and so immensely hazardous.

It was a quiet voice, small but clear. It said one word.

Home.

Sev suddenly yawned by her side.

"Come on," she said softly to the girl, "Let's get you to bed." Jane crossed around the bed and lifted the corner of the quilt. "Is this okay? Can she sleep here?" she whispered to Mike across the bed as the small girl crawled in.

He looked up and nodded kindly, giving Sev his direct attention. He picked up a pillow that had fallen to the floor, leaned over Kali and handed it to Sev.

"Thank you," Sev said quietly as she curled under the quilt beside Kali.

"No problem," Mike whispered as he smiled at Sev, "Nothing but good dreams, okay? You're safe here."

"Okay," Sev replied serenely, matching his tone. "Good night, Mike."

"Good night, Sev," he replied with a final smile before he turned and began to collect the blood soaked rags from his nightstand.

Jane crossed back around the bed and followed Mike into the dark kitchen.

"She likes you," Jane said in surprise.

"Well," Mike intimated with a playful shrug as he turned on the faucet to wash his hands, "Making ten year old telekinetic lab escapees comfortable is a specialty of mine, so..."

Jane rolled her eyes and bit back a laugh. Mike smiled back at her bashfully and tossed his hair as he wiped his hands dry on a dish towel. Her chest warmed dangerously.

"Are you okay?" he asked after a pause, "After tonight?"

"I'm okay," she replied with a smile that felt too large for the

question.

"Good," he replied as he turned back to the sink, turned on the tap, and wet the dish towel in his hands. He turned back to Jane and stepped in closely toward her.

"Hold still," he whispered.

Her breath caught in her throat as his left hand gently cupped her chin and tilted her face up towards him. With his other hand he raised the wet dish cloth and began to lightly dab under her nose to remove the blood that was still caked against her lip. Her eyes fluttered shut against his touch as he worked. His hand was warm, caring, and soft against her face. He shifted his hold on her and placed his palm against her cheek to stabilize her as he finished up with a few final swipes. She fought the urge to lean into it.

Mike's eyes flicked to hers shyly as he pulled his hands away and assessed his work.

"Better?" she asked, her voice creaking dangerously as she worked in vain to conceal her shortened breaths.

"Better," he affirmed with a nod.

They stood in silence in the darkness for a long moment. He was so close she could feel his breath against her.

"You - you must be exhausted," he stuttered suddenly as he backed up from her and crossed into the main room.

"Well, shit," he breathed as he looked around the room. It was instantly apparent as she followed him that the only potential sleeping surface was occupied. Besides the bed, Mike's apartment consisted of nothing more than a table, a dresser, a desk, and three metal chairs.

"Got it," he said suddenly as his finger popped up into the air to punctuate an idea. "Follow me."

Mike crossed to his door, slipped out into the hallway and beckoned Jane to follow him. She trudged to the entryway, her feet suddenly

feeling like lead as her exhaustion reared up. When she entered the hallway she found Mike standing next to a door across the hall.

"I know it's been a long day but do you think you've got a single lock pick in you?" he asked with a smile. "My neighbor is gone for the next couple of weeks. He won't notice if we use his space. Plus, he's a massive stoner anyway so it probably doesn't matter if we trash the place because he won't remember how he left it."

Jane casually tilted her head and the metal of the lock clicked. Mike laughed and shook his head as he pushed the door open and stepped back for her to enter.

"What?" she asked as she stopped in the doorway and looked up at him.

"Nothing," he chuckled, his eyes twinkling as he shook his head. "I just... Well, I don't usually spend time with people who can pick locks with their mind anymore. I kinda forgot how awesome it was."

Jane let out a tired laugh, "Well, get used to it for the next couple of days, I guess."

"Gladly," Mike replied with a smirk as they turned to survey the new apartment. Streetlight poured into the room, showing the place in shadow.

Jane's eyes narrowed and she looked back at Mike. "This place is way nicer than yours."

"Gee, thanks," he replied sardonically as he ran his fingers through his hair, "But yeah, on second thought maybe let's not trash the place?"

"Wasn't planning on it," she said dryly as she stumbled toward a love seat on the far end of the room.

"Take the bed. I'll sleep on the love seat," Mike offered.

She turned to look at him indignantly, her eyebrow cocked as she pointed at the tiny couch, "Mike, do you see that thing? You are two feet longer than that love seat."

"I'll be fine. I didn't cheat death tonight. You earned the bed," he replied in a tone that left no room for debate.

"Fine," she groaned as she turned on her heel and trudged toward the bed, no energy left in her voice to belabor the point.

Jane reached the bed and basically just fell in, her body supremely relieved that she was finally giving it rest. She sighed contentedly as her muscles released. It was the most comfortable mattress she had laid on it years.

"Do you need anything?" he asked as he crossed toward the bed.

"No, I'm fine," she said as a massive yawn overtook her. She opened her eyes drowsily and looked over at him. "Thank you, Mike," she said quietly as her eyes closed.

He didn't respond right away, but it was clear to her that he hadn't moved. She peeked an eye back open and spied him looking at her with a tender smile.

"I'm happy you're here."

His voice was soft, earnest, vulnerable as he spoke and it perfectly matched the look in his eyes. Her heart jumped despite her fatigue.

"Me too," she breathed as her eyes fluttered shut again.

Another quiet pause. His body still present by the side of the bed.

"Night El," he whispered.

"Night Mike."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Hi lovely readers, thank you all so much for your amazing comments on the last chapter! It really helped keep me motivated to dive into the rest of this fic. Let me know your thoughts :) - L -



## 8. Chapter 8

### Notes for the Chapter:

Hello beauties! This chapter is brought to you by the song "Past Lives" by BORNS. It came on my mix right as I was in the throws of the final lines of this chapter and just overwhelmed me with all of the appropriate feels. It's Mike's song, for sure. Enjoy!

Mike awoke suddenly, wincing as his body registered the severe crick in his neck. How in the hell was he going to be able to sleep on this couch another night? He groaned as he stretched, almost falling off of the small sofa as he attempted to straighten his stiff legs. The grey morning poured in through the window and bathed the bed in light on the other side of the room. El's dark hair was visible against a pillow, peeking out from under a puffy cream colored comforter. It seemed she was still asleep.

El...

She had come to him.

Mike smiled softly and shook his head in wonder at the thought.

The last three days had been an absolute rollercoaster. The thoughts that bubbled like lava beneath the surface of this mind flew in many directions. On the level of danger she was in. On the documentation he had purged all throughout the night while the girls had slept. On the three days of work he had missed. On the shitty fucking way he had just broken up with his girlfriend. On what an asshole he was for not feeling entirely shitty about it. On the tenuousness of the circumstances that had brought El to him, and on the probable realities that could take her away.

But he couldn't really hear any of them, because El's presence in the room elicited a euphoria within him that, at least for the moment, drowned them all out.

She stirred.

Mike's stomach swooped as he watched her through half closed eyes. She crawled out of the bed and stretched, a sliver of her abdomen peeking out from under her black sweater. A corner of his mind became acutely aware of each way her body had matured through the intervening years. He quickly attempted to push the thoughts out of his mind, to mixed results.

She padded over to a mirror on the wall as she rubbed her eyes. He had full view of her slender back as she began to methodically remove the fasteners from her frizzy and tightly pinned hair. Strand by strand, she let tight coils fall down and combed through them with her fingers. When she was done she tossed her head forward and shook out a shockingly long mane of chocolate curls. Something stirred deep within his chest.

He suddenly became very aware of his voyeuristic behavior. He coughed and stretched in an effort to look like he had just woken up. She turned to him as he did so, her hand still combing through her dark locks.

"Hi," she said quietly. Her dark makeup was smudged around her eyes, making her look like she had partied too hard the night before. It was... incredibly cute.

"Hey," he replied as he attempted to stand. He stumbled against the arm of the short couch, falling back against the sofa once more. El giggled, the tinkle of her voice filling the room.

He looked up with a twinge of embarrassment and was struck with an anxiety inducing realization as his eyes met her's.

He had absolutely no idea what to do with El Hopper trapped in his apartment.

It was a dream come true, but he had never really gotten past the part where she walked through the door. Sure, he had known the girl since he was twelve, and at one time he had known her more intimately than anyone else. But seven years was an insanely long time, and at that moment the woman who stood before him seemed almost like a stranger.

One step at a time, he told himself.

"Breakfast?" he asked awkwardly.

"Eggos?" she chirped, her voice rising in anticipation. Mike laughed in surprise.

Okay, maybe she wasn't so much of a stranger.

The other girls were still asleep as they crossed the hallway into Mike's loft. El made her way to the bed to check on her sisters as Mike searched through his kitchen in blind hope of finding Eggos. He ultimately found a box deep within his freezer, a coat of ice dusting the cardboard. He wasn't too much of a fan of them anymore, but there always seemed to be a box in the back of his freezer, just in case.

He shook the frost off of the box and began to pop them into the toaster as he heard footsteps enter the kitchen. He turned to see Kali walking slowly toward him from the other room. She was tiny, but that didn't stop her from being incredibly intimidating. Her dark eyes were intense and scrutinizing. Mike stirred uncomfortably in her gaze.

"Mike Wheeler." She stated in a peculiar accent that he couldn't place.

"Um...Hi," he stuttered as he wiped his hands on a dishrag and reached out to shake her hand. "It's nice to finally meet you."

"And you," she replied, her eyes burning him as she shook his hand. "You saved our lives last night. Thank you."

"Oh, yeah, of course. I – um... yeah." The toaster popped and saved him from his stammering. "Are you hungry?"

"No. Do you have coffee?" she asked as she walked to the small table against the dividing wall and sat down. Mike nodded and moved to put the coffee pot on.

"So, this place," she started, her tone very professional and to the point, "What is it and are we safe here for a few days?"

"Oh, yeah. Absolutely," he replied as he poured coffee grounds into a filter. "It's a hacker collective, and for the most part its abandoned right now. No one really stays around here for December. Like I was telling El, my neighbor is gone until after New Years so..."

"Any surveillance?" she asked. "I haven't had a chance to do a sweep of the building yet."

Mike laughed, "The opposite of surveillance, Actually. This place is kind of an anti-establishment 'stick it to the man' group of people. You're pretty safe here, as long as you weren't seen entering."

"No one saw us leave. No one saw us walk here. And no one saw us enter," she replied with a cool pride. "And you're fine with us staying a few days?"

"A few days, a couple weeks. And I can help you guys figure out next steps," he offered nervously as he turned to face her.

Kali nodded but didn't respond. She observed him silently as she leaned back in the chair. "You're taller than I expected. I thought Jane had told me everything about you, but she never mentioned that you were so tall."

"Kali!" El suddenly cried from the other room, her voice thick with annoyance. An amused smirk lit up Kali's face. El appeared from around the dividing wall, Sev directly behind her. "Ignore my sister," she said as she rolled her eyes and waved Kali off dismissively.

"I simply said he was tall," Kali replied with an enigmatic grin.

Mike turned back to the counter and smirked silently at the interaction, his face feeling the slightest bit hot.

"Do you have anything other than Eggos? Sev doesn't like them," Jane asked as she walked up to the counter. The small shadow of a girl popped up beside her.

"Donuts?" Sev peeped with hopefulness, looking up at Mike.

Mike looked down at the small girl and was suddenly struck by her icy blue eyes. In the frenzy of the night he had had no time to give

the girl any thought. She was pale, with a light smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose. She had the start of a dirty blond head of hair, only half an inch long. She was wearing an old Replacements t-shirt that he vaguely recognized and a pair of sweatpants that were three sizes too big. She looked up at him expectantly.

"Hmm," he replied sweetly, "I don't have any donuts but I do have..." he held out the word as he turned to his messy pantry shelves and grabbed a Honey Bun that Dustin had left when he'd stayed a few weeks back. "This will do the trick," he said as he handed it to her.

Sev's eyes widened at the sight of the plastic wrapped sweet roll. "Thank you," she whispered sincerely. She tore the wrapper open carefully as she crossed to the table and took a seat across from Kali.

"Leave it to Dustin to make sure I'm stocked up with all the food a ten year old would want," Mike said with a laugh as he popped the Eggos out of the toaster. El's fingers brushed against his as she greedily plucked one of the waffles from his hand and took a bite.

"Dustin was here?" she asked, her voice lilting as a thoughtful smile lit up her features. "How is he?"

Mike filled El in on the comings and goings of Dustin as he poured himself and Kali cups of coffee. El leaned against the counter next to him as she munched on her Eggos, her voice suddenly full of excited questions. Where was he? What did he major in in college? How was his mom? How was his mom's cat? How was his love life? The conversation then turned to Lucas, and Will. A mix of nostalgic memories and questions about their lives traced them easily through their entire breakfast.

Talking to her was so... easy. The conversation worked to melt any feelings of awkwardness that had plagued the first few minutes of his day.

But it was also so mind blowingly different, he realized with a thrill of exhilaration as she reminisced about a memory of Dustin and Lucas. Her vocabulary. Her communication. Her proficiency. It was... perfect. There was absolutely no trace of her past difficulties with language.

It had been a massive undertaking in the year between the closing of the gate and her coming out of hiding. All of the party, along with Hopper, Nancy and Joyce, had pitched in on the improvised language lessons. But even with all of their help she had remained a pretty quiet person through those years. Not that he had minded. He'd always had enough words for the both of them, by way of his rambling.

But to talk to her like this, with all of the insecurity and reservation surrounding her speech seemingly gone? It made his heart grow three sizes and left him with a million questions. There was so much about her that he wanted to know.

"I hate to interrupt this reunion," Kali interjected, making them both jump as they remembered there were other people in the room. "I'm going back to bed. I'm exhausted. I need another day to recharge. Lay low today, Jane. We can pick the planning back up tomorrow. Thank you for the coffee, Mike. And the bed."

El nodded to her sister, crossed the room and gave her a hug. The girls whispered in each other's embrace for a quick moment before Kali disappeared from the room. El turned back around and looked at Sev. The girl was balled up with her legs against her chest, her t-shirt pulled over her knees. She chewed on a second Honey Bun that she had somehow procured while El and Mike had been busy talking. The two wrappers were strewn messily across the table.

"Good," she said as she held up the pastry, her eyes wide with delight.

El smiled and looked back at Mike. "What are you up to today?"

"Oh, absolutely nothing. I wasn't even supposed to be in town so my next few days are a blank slate." He instantly regretted the admission as her eyes went wide with something that looked like guilt.

"I'm... sorry. You had to cancel plans?" she replied quietly.

"Oh, it's totally fine. Really," Mike said with thick reassurance. "This is... this is great."

El regarded him for a moment, her eyes soft with a nervous

vulnerability that made Mike feel entirely helpless in her gaze. She blinked and nodded, a small smile growing as she bit her bottom lip. "Okay. Sev?" she said abruptly, changing the subject. "Do you know what a TV is?"

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Whatever Mike Wheeler had done to deserve a simple day on the couch with El Hopper, doing something as hilariously mundane as watching TV, he was suddenly entirely grateful that he had done it.

The three of them were piled upon the small sofa in the other apartment. Sev was curled deeply into the arm of one side, leaving El in the middle pressed between the two of them.

He sat back and nursed his second cup of coffee as he observed El teaching Sev how to change the channels with a simple flick of her powers. Sev giggled as the TV screen flashed disparate visions of faces and beaches and buildings and cartoons.

"Ooh, stop here!" El called out suddenly.

Mike bit back a groan as his eyes fell upon the tacky set of a soap opera. He peeked over at El, who's eyes were wide and focused on the screen.

"You still... watch soap operas?" he asked tentatively.

El blushed. "I haven't watched TV in at least six months. You can give me five minutes of Victor and Nikki."

"This is Sev's first impression of TV," he said in mock annoyance, "You don't want her to hate it forever."

El shoved against him in retort as she caught his eye. A quick smile flicked across her face, and it remained there as she looked back at the screen. Mike drowned his own smile into his coffee mug and subtly watched El's face become enraptured by the scene in front of her. It was a million times better than the drivel that was actually on the screen.

Sev seemed to grow bored of the soap opera right away. The girl stood up and walked to the window. He watched her as she propped

herself up on the ledge and looked down onto the street below.

"What is... the white?" she asked as she pointed out the window.

"Oh," he replied in surprise, "It's snow. First time you've seen it?"

The girl nodded, her eyes a slight bit forlorn, and turned back to the window. "Snow. Pretty," she said quietly.

Her reaction made his heart ache.

"Hey, Sev?" he called over. "We can go up to the roof when it's dark and see the snow for real. It's safe up there. Wanna do that?" he offered.

"Yes!" the girl cried suddenly, exuding an excitement he hadn't seen from her yet. Mike couldn't help but grin.

"You got it," Mike promised with a smile.

She bounded back to the couch and took a seat again, her smile blinding him as she looked over at Mike. Then, she promptly turned back to the screen and flicked her head.

"Hey!" El cried, turning in annoyance to the small girl on her right. "That was just getting good!"

Sev shrugged and looked back over at Mike, an amused glance in her eyes. Mike burst out in a fit of laughter.

"I like this kid. She has good taste," Mike quipped.

"She likes you *too* much," El retorted in a huff.

Sev giggled and flicked her head again.

El and Sev's faces stared back at them from the TV screen.

"Well...shit," El sighed darkly.

El's grainy surveillance photo with her blonde wig and dark makeup took up the left side of the screen. Sev appeared in a clearer photo sporting a hospital gown and a shaved head, on the right.



*" - taken last night from a children's cancer ward by this unidentified female suspect. Caucasian female estimated 20 years old. We urge you to call NYPD immediately with any reports or sightings. Do not approach as the suspect is armed and dangerous. Now, to the weather - "*

"FUCK!" Mike cried as he jumped to his feet, every nerve in his body reacting in panic. "Shit shit shit shit - "

"Mike - "

"Shit!"

"MIKE!"

El's hand was suddenly grasped firmly within his. She tugged at him to sit back down on the couch. He whipped around and looked at her in surprise. Her demeanor was cool and collected, much unlike the abject terror that was coursing through his veins.

"Calm down." Her voice was cold, low and firm.

Mike slowly sat down beside her, his eyes widening with confusion. "Why aren't you - -"

El scoffed, her face cynical, "- freaking out? I mean, I'm not *happy* about it. But I've been hiding from these people my whole life. That picture just means that my punk phase is over. I'm mostly just sad about my blonde wig."

Mike stared at her in shock as El turned to Sev. The girl had terrified tears in her catatonic eyes. Mike suddenly felt horrible for making such a big scene.

"I promise it's going to be okay. The Bad Men aren't going to find you. We've got a plan," El said in a soft and comforting tone as she ruffled the small girl's hair. "Why don't you turn back one channel? I think that was a cartoon."

The girl sniffled, rubbed her nose, and clicked her head to the side. Chip and Dale Rescue Rangers flicked onto the screen. The cartoon played over the room innocuously as Mike leaned back in the couch, attempting to control his breathing.

And then he felt it. El's hand was still in his. He glanced up to find her staring back at him. Her lips were upturned, but the smile did not reach her eyes. Her expression was restrained, and if he could read her correctly, a little afraid. She took a deep breath and her eyes softened. She squeezed his hand twice, her smile becoming a bit more natural, and then pulled away.

---

Mike spent the rest of the day staring gobsmacked at his computer screen, cursing at the insane amount of files that included her picture and description. It was too much for him to clean up, clearly, and it left him with an acidic feeling in his stomach. He dropped his hand with a thud against the desk, feeling entirely helpless.

"Snow?" a high voice chirped.

Mike turned around to see Sev standing in the doorway. The sun had set at some point during his work, though he hadn't noticed. Sev was dressed in an oversized black leather jacket and a pair of converse sneakers. She sported the same cropped black wig that El had worn a couple days back.

"Snow?" she asked again.

Mike stretched in an attempt to shake off his anxiety. Going to the roof to play in the snow sounded like the last thing he wanted to do, but there was no way he could tell the poor girl no.

"You ready?" El's voice called out as she appeared in the doorway from the other apartment. She was bundled in her oversized peacoat, her curly mass of hair pulled into a messy bun.

Maybe the roof wouldn't be that bad.

Mike got dressed for the cold as quickly as he could, tip toeing around his bed as Kali continued to sleep like the dead. He pulled a grey stocking cap over his unruly hair and tugged his gloves from his coat pocket as he met them in the doorway.

"Here," he said, handing his gloves to Sev. "You're gonna want those if you want to play in the snow. It's cold"

The girl stared at the gloves for a moment before taking them and looking up at Mike, her gaze incredibly sincere. "Thank you."

Mike nodded and began to lead in the direction of the roof access staircase. He caught El's eye as they entered the stairwell. The look she gave him almost stopped him in his tracks. It was warm, grateful, and filled him with the intense urge to touch her. He fought it off, shook his head, led the way up the steps.

Once at the top, he attempted to shoulder the cold metal door open, but it would only budge about three inches. A thick snow drift became apparent through the sliver of the doorway. He pressed his full weight against the door a few more times, the effort getting him a couple inches further each time. He pushed again and -

- was suddenly flat on his ass on the rooftop. The offending snow bank had been blown away by way of El's mind, turning his final push against the door into a full body catapult.

"I am SO SORRY!" El's gasping voice entered his ears as her shoes appeared on the ground in front of his face. Her apology was followed by an unbridled laugh. "I am so so sorry," she trilled again, her words punctuated with giggles.

Mike grunted as he felt El's arms wrap under him, helping him to his feet.

"Are you okay?!" she panted as she tried to catch her breath, her face absolutely breaking with mirth.

"You could have warned me!" Mike replied with as much annoyance as he could, but the look on El's face was working to wash away any of the pain from the fall.

A trace of guilt passed through El's features as she replied, but her laugh had not entirely left her voice. "I wasn't thinking. I'm sorry."

"So anyway," Mike said dramatically as he turned his eyes to Sev. "This is snow."

The little girl stood in the doorway, her attention not on them at all. Her eyes were wide. Transfixed. Absolutely in love with the world of

puffy white around her.

Mike smiled, the rest of the pain from his fall ebbing away at the sight. He was developing an intense soft spot for the girl. Every look she gave was excited, full of the awe of experiencing the world for the first time.

It reminded him of El in their first years. He'd loved bringing her new candies and treats so he could watch her face as she tasted them. He could still see her unadulterated excitement the first time she strummed an electric guitar in Jonathan's room when they were in ninth grade. And he would never forget the look on her face the first time she touched velvet, tucked inside the box of the promise ring he had given her for her sixteenth birthday. She had almost seemed more excited about the interior of the box than the ring itself.

The greater cityscape stretched out before them. Their rooftop the highest on the block, leaving them with no prying eyes. The whole expanse was positively buried in snow. Big drifts existed against the embankment at the edge.

Mike bent down and balled up a small pile into his hands. He stepped back... and abruptly smashed it against El's puffy hair.

"Hey!" she exclaimed, backing up from him with a look of pure shock and betrayal.

"Now we're even," he replied with a smirk as he crossed over to Sev. "Ready to play?"

Sev pretty much launched herself into a snowbank.

Mike's bare hands were screaming with stinging pain after thirty minutes in the snow, but he pushed past it as he and Sev rolled up the final ball for a snow man's head. El was perched against the roof's edge. Snow had never really been her thing, for good reason, but she seemed content to watch them as they played.

"Okay, you ready?" he asked the little girl. She nodded and flicked her head. The large ball drifted through the air and gingerly dropped onto the larger balls below it.

"Awesome!" Mike exclaimed as he held his hand up for a high five. Sev stared at him blankly. Mike leaned down, picked the girl's hand up, and slapped it against his.

"High Five," he instructed, "You do it in, like, celebration of stuff."

"High Five," she replied slowly. She nodded in understanding as she held her hand up. Mike slapped it and smiled.

THWAP

"Aggggh!" Mike's cheek burned painfully as a snowball smashed against his face. He whipped around to see El staring at him with a devious smirk. Her hands were stuffed in her pockets as she casually leaned against the embankment. She hadn't moved an inch. A second snowball hovered near her knees, a true threat.

"Now we're even, Whee- HEY!"

The snowball hit El smack in the nose and burst into a million pieces, leaving her face with a full dusting of white. Sev cracked up loudly at Mike's side, and he doubled over with laughter at the look on El's face. El jumped up as she scrambled her hands at her face, dusting off the offending wet flakes, before she flicked her head.

Mike winced in preparation for the snowball.

But nothing happened.

Mike peeked up to find El in a position he had never seen before.

Purely frozen.

Her eyes were as wide as saucers and her body was shaking violently. Her lips were locked in a horrifying silent scream. The snowball was still locked in air in front of her knees.

Mike's eyes widened in alarm. "El?"

Unnamed dread filled him as a trill of blood began to appear from her nostril. Her limbs began to shake more violently but they didn't move an inch.

Sev giggled from his right.

"Stop!" he called roughly to the girl, reaching out to her in panic. Sev faltered as she looked over at him in surprise. Suddenly, the air filled with a choked gasp. Mike turned back to see El falling helplessly into a snow drift.

He was at her side before she even touched the ground.

"Holy shit, are you okay?" he asked frantically. El didn't speak. She nodded weakly as she looked up at him. Her eyes were filled with a fear he couldn't define. Snow still dusted her eyebrows and lashes from the offending snowball. Small flecks of white mingled with the red of the blood trickling from her nose. She leaned against Mike as he pulled her up from the ground.

"I'm... sorry," Sev squeaked, her features trepidatious as she approached them.

"I need to go downstairs. Bed," El muttered weakly.

"Okay, yeah." Mike pulled her up against him tightly as he made his way to the door. "Sev, we can come back up tomorrow night if we want but we should probably get rid of the snowman."

Sev nodded glumly and the balls of snow immediately smashed into the roof as though they had never been there at all.

"Thanks," he replied, shooting the girl a reassuring look. "Can you get the door?"

Sev scurried forward and opened the door, allowing Mike to go through with El before she shut it behind them. El's body flagged against his as he stumbled her down the stairs. His arm gripped tightly around her waist. They reached the apartment doors before El finally spoke.

"Thanks. I can take it from here," she said, stiffly untangling herself from Mike as she worked to stand on her own. Her face was pallid. Dark blue veins traced her eyes. Her second nostril had started to drip.

"Are you sure?" he asked uneasily.

She nodded firmly and reached for the door. "Just make sure Sev gets to bed?"

"Of course," he replied as the door shut with a thud behind her.

Mike turned to Sev to see her shaking. Tears were streaking down her face. "I- I'm sorry." she sputtered.

"Hey, hey, it's okay," Mike said, his voice gentle as he leaned down to meet the girl face to face. "I just... what happened?"

"I stopped her," she squeaked as she sniffled.

"Yeah, I saw that. But... how?"

The concept of something, anything, stopping El from exerting her powers blew his mind. It was an absolutely terrifying concept.

Sev shrugged, not sure how to answer the question.

"Okay," Mike whispered, rubbing his hand thoughtfully against the small girl's shoulder. "I'm sure she's going to be okay. But I think that stopping her might hurt her. I don't know. So maybe don't... do that again?"

Sev nodded in understanding. "Can I go to bed now?"

"Yeah, of course." Mike stood and led Sev into the loft.

---

By the time Sev had fallen asleep it was past midnight.

Mike was bundled with his knees tightly against his chest. It was the only way he could sleep on the love seat. He closed his eyes, but all he could see was the look of pure terror on El's face as she was frozen in Sev's grasp. He shuddered at the thought.

Suddenly, screams erupted in the room.

Mike shot his head up from the couch to see El thrashing in her sleep.

He was instantly on this feet.

"El!" he called as he rounded the bed. Her face was contorted in fear, her eyes pressed tightly shut. He shook her shoulders with both hands as she continued to writhe and kick against the mattress.

"El - You're having a nightmare. Wake up."

She twitched and moaned as he repeated her name. Her body finally slowed its writhing and her breathing evened out after a while.

"Mike?" she murmured, her mouth hardly opening as his name escaped her lips. Her eyes were still closed. El's hand landed lazily on his arm.

"Yeah, it's me," he whispered softly.

Her fingers wrapped loosely around his wrist as she rolled away from him in the bed, pulling his arm with her. Mike's heart skipped and his breathing became shallow as his body helplessly followed his arm into the bed beside her.

El snuggled against him, her voice murmuring his name once more, still clearly asleep. Her fingers fumbled mindlessly with his. He willingly let their fingers intertwine, his mind in shock as every nerve in his body drank in the sensations.

Her hair tickled his nose. He breathed in deeply and swallowed hard as his heart smashed against his chest.

She still smelled the same.

At that, all hesitation washed away. Tears stung his eyes as he eagerly threaded his other arm beneath her. He pulled her into him until there was no way she could be any closer. She cooed softly and shifted against him, leaning into his embrace.

He buried his face against her and placed a light kiss to the top of her head.

An eternal tightness in his chest broke open. He shuddered as a breath he had been holding for seven years released into the folds of



her hair.

It was the best he had slept in years.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

I absolutely adored writing this chapter and would love to hear your thoughts. And thank you all so much for your feedback on the story so far. I absolutely thrive on kudos and comments. Thank you so so much for reading!

- L -

## 9. Chapter 9

### Notes for the Chapter:

Happy Sunday! I made you all a Spotify playlist to go along with this fic if you'd like to subscribe to it. If you have a song that belongs with this let me know in the comments! Thanks to Jennieclaire for the inspiration on getting this playlist up and running!

<https://open.spotify.com/user/laurawiese/playlist/538rIGfyj8dv6h7WZ0lj0d>

And with that, enjoy chapter 9!

### ***March 1987***

El sat on the edge of his roof in the chilly night air. She didn't know how long she'd been there, stalling the inevitable. Her tears had long since dried with no more left to fall. Her knees were pulled tightly against her chest, huddled under her oversized Replacements t-shirt for warmth, as she rocked herself against the scratchy shingles.

*I can't do it.*

Her lip trembled as she eyed her bag on the ground in front of his house. The single visible reminder of what she had to do. She felt sick, like she was going to wretch at any moment.

"I have no choice. They know where I am."

She said it out loud so she could force herself to understand.

Everyone in her life had noticed that she had been acting... off... for the last week. She'd never been good at concealing anything she was thinking. Her face was like an open book. But this? This she had tried to hide. This she had wanted to hide from even herself.

The tracker.

The pock marked man with a receding hairline and ice blue eyes. The

man who had violated her mind and threatened everyone she held dear, *by name*.

She had started seeing the man in the Void on the first day of Spring Break just as she'd attempted to fade into a nap. The man who could look back at her and talk to her in a way that only Mama had ever been able to. *The man who she knew could sense where she was*. The man who said he was with Brenner, and days away from sending the Bad Men once he had collected enough information. Whatever that had meant.

She wasn't supposed to hear most of it, she could tell that much was true. But in this moment it was cold comfort.

She had brushed it off on day one, trying to believe that the horrid words the man had spoken were a dream. She tried not to think about it on day two. But by day five, when she'd seen him each day, she knew there was nothing else she could do. She had to get to her sister, the only person who could help. And she had to get as far away from the people she loved as she could. It was only way to keep them safe.

Hopper, her fantastic father who was absolutely going to crack to pieces when he realized she was gone. She felt so desperately guilty doing this to him. But... he would never let her leave and he would end up getting them all killed with his stubbornness.

And Joyce, Will.

Nancy, Dustin, Lucas.

Beautiful lovely Max, the best friend a girl could ask for.

And Mike.

Mike.

**Mike.**

Somewhere deep within her body she found another round of tears just for him. Her right hand clasped over her left ring finger as though it were in pain. The metal representing their future burned

against her like a broken promise.

She looked over at his window.

It was time.

She shakily rose to her feet, her fingers trembling in dread as she rapped on the glass.

A beautiful and bittersweet memory of just two weeks prior came to her mind while she waited for him to wake, hoping he never would. It was all she had been able to think about in the days between, until the man appeared.

She had been in this exact same spot under such starkly different circumstances.

Excited, nervous, yearning.

It had been their first time. And it had been... perfect.

The memory now felt like ash in her mouth.

She forced her fingers to tap again, more insistent this time.

Mike finally rose. She watched his shadow move through the room as he crossed to open the window. He flashed her a sleepy smile through the glass as he raised it.

"Hey El" he whispered, the light in his face going out as he saw the anguish in her eyes. "What's wrong?"

He stepped back and held his hand out to help her in, as he always did. For the first time in her life she didn't want to take it.

She shakily took his hand and pulled herself through the window.

Mike instantly pulled her against him in an attempt quell her pain. It was not the first time she had crawled through his window in tears in the middle of the night, after a fight or a nightmare or a panic attack. She buried herself into his chest, trying to soak up as much of him as she could. He gathered her curly hair into his hands like he always

did when she was sad. His fingers against her scalp had always helped to calm her.

This time she only cried harder.

"I - have to go..." she choked out between wracking sobs.

Mike pulled her tighter, "No, it's okay. I'll sneak out and drive you home when you need to leave. Did you and Hopper get in a fight? Did you have another nightmare?"

She shook her head against his chest, unable to find the words.

"Ellie. It's okay. What's going on?" he asked, nervousness entering his voice for the first time.

She pulled away and looked up to him. The streetlights reflected off of his face, his deep dark eyes glistening in the glow.

He. was. beautiful.

How could she say what she needed to say? How could she find the words? How could she look this amazing boy in the eye and tell him she was...gone?

She had to keep him safe.

With that she found her footing, and miraculously, her voice steadied.

"I have to... go, Mike. For real. Away. *They know where I am. ...Papa knows.*"

Mike gasped. "How do you know?"

"The Void." she said simply. "They've found me there. I have to find Kali. She can keep me safe. But... but you aren't safe. None of you here are safe. I have to leave."

The truth settled into her stomach like lead.

Mike stared at her blankly, speechless.

"No."

"What?" she winced.

"No," Mike said resolutely. His face suddenly hard. "We'll fight this, El. We fought it last time. We've fought it every time. We'll fight it again."

"Mike..." he didn't understand. Of course he didn't understand. He was so beautifully stubborn. So rash and quick and fearless in his intelligence to make a plan.

"Explain to me why that isn't an option," he challenged, his hands now gripping her shoulders. She could feel him shaking.

El swallowed tightly and looked up to meet him eye to eye. "This isn't like last time. They threatened you. They know so much about all of you. We can't stop it if I stay. I have to go... to keep all of you safe. They're coming for me, Mike. I can stay a step ahead and Kali can help me. And that - that can keep you safe."

Mike's eyes were dead, devoid of emotion, in a way she had never seen them before. Grief then entered his features as she felt the air shift. He shook his head and whispered, suddenly looking helpless. "Please don't do this, El. Please!"

"You're not safe as long as I'm here. I'm not safe as long as I'm here."

"I know, but I lo... Eleven... Just... FUCK! Just..." his voice tightened in panic.

Her tears started up again, hard and fresh as she threw her arms around him. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

He stood stock still in her embrace as she held him as tightly as she could. Her tears drenched his t-shirt and his tears could suddenly be felt falling into her hair. They were quiet for a long time.

His voice was thick when he finally spoke again. He cupped his hands firmly against her face and looked deeply into her eyes, making her resolution shake.

"Promise you'll find me when you're safe. Promise me."

She breathed a sigh of relief and a felt a knife of grief shove into her chest at the same time.

She nodded slowly. "I Promise." she whispered.

"Eleven, I -"

"Mike..."

His lips met hers roughly.

"I love you." His lips brushed the words against hers, painting them there in permanence.

"I love you."

---

*How had the most amazing day she'd had in years turned out to be so incredibly terrifying?*

Jane shook in pain as hot tears ripped down her face. She pulled her knees tightly against her chest in the unfamiliar bed. It all hit her like a hurricane.

*What had Sev **done**?*

It was unlike anything she had ever felt in her life.

The screaming pain that erupted through her as she fought... *and lost...* against the force that rendered her completely incapacitated still echoed through her limbs. The icy terror that bled through her body radiated like a stench in the air around her, making it almost impossible to breathe.

It was the only thing she trusted about herself. Her single proven strength. Her power. And it had been taken from her in a flash. Turned off a like a light switch by the power of another. Without it, she was nothing.

A dark corner of her soul cracked open at the horrifying thought. She

gasped as she felt it trigger and pull her under. Into the space that belonged to the eternal helplessness of her childhood. Belonged to the Bad Men. Belonged to the blue eyed man. Belonged to Papa.

The dreadful fear that dwelled there, buried so deep, spilled over her mind like tar. It worked like a domino affect as it smashed each trauma into the next, leaving her in a vivid swirl of fear. The faces of the all the people she had failed, their dead lifeless bodies at her helpless feet, coursed through her vision like ghosts as her grief swelled and guilt choked her.

She had never felt weaker. And she had never felt more toxic.

*She could not let him be the next.*

Mike's effortless smile and dazzling dark eyes floated tauntingly through her vision as her body quaked. The shocking level of ease that she had felt back in his presence, even after so many years apart, and the almost perfect day she had spent with him, suddenly felt like a cruel joke. A peek through the veil of what could have been, had she not been... her.

*He was in danger by her simply being here. It was the reason she had left in the first place, to keep him safe. Another broken promise.*

*She could not let him be the next.*

Jane roughly threw her face into her pillow to muffle the agonized scream that rushed out of her violated body. The bed lifted off of the ground and smashed back into the floor, causing her to bounce against the mattress hard.

Eventually, after what felt like days, her tears slowed as there were no more left, and she numbly drifted off into a fitful sleep.

...But it was no better than being awake...

A thick rain fell through the black. It smashed against her body in her hazy subconscious, every drop splashing her with more cold wet fear. The pain was nameless.

She screamed, but no sound came out.



She kicked, but her legs did not move.

Helpless. Frozen. Her body bucked against an unmoving restraint that seemed to threaten her very existence.

She felt small. So so small.

The rain fell harder.

"-EL-"

His voice echoed in the distance like a lighthouse on a raging ocean, miles away, beckoning her toward safety. Her mouth tried to shape his name, but her lips could not move.

"-EL-"

Closer, clearer.

"-EL-"

He appeared beside her. Young. So young. So beautifully pure. His raven hair wet against his sweet cherubic face. Clad in a blue jacket, striped polo shirt and the baggy pants of a child.

His deep kind eyes silently exuded the feeling she so desperately yearned to feel.

Safe.

The boy leaned down beside her, his hand on her shoulder.

"Mike?" she croaked, her breath returning to her body in a gasp. The spell broken at his touch.

He was strong where she was weak. Light where she was dark.

"Yeah, it's me," The boy whispered softly. A reassuring smile on his lips as he took off his jacket, lifted her, and wrapped it around shaking body.

"Mike."

She fell helplessly against him, soaking up his refuge as he held her in his innocent arms. His hand gently ran across her shaved head, washing the terror off of her traumatized mind as her vision faded to black.

---

She stirred as she felt the early morning light bathe her face.

A fog of sleep laid heavily over her aching brain as she yawned and blinked her puffy eyes open to the first light of dawn. Her vision fought to make sense of the disparate image that greeted her. Her forehead was pressed against something so closely that she couldn't see the details past the mass of black hair that tickled against her lashes.

She gasped silently as her eyes shot open in shock.

She thought he had been a dream.

Mike...

Suddenly, she could feel him everywhere.

His arms encircled her, holding her tightly against his entire body, face to face. His chest rose and fell against hers. She shuddered as his breath dusted across her cheek. Her legs were tangled up with his, her toes stealing the heat from his shins. He was so incredibly warm.

She had no idea how they'd gotten this way, but she couldn't find it in herself to care. Because at that moment a heady trill melted down her entire body, buzzing from her chest and making her shiver against him. It felt like a drug, insulating her from the cold core of pain that she could feel lying in wait at the edge of her mind. But at least in this moment, it could not reach her.

She had forgotten. He was magic like that.

Jane leaned back ever so slightly. The light of morning played across his face.

It felt like seeing him for the very first time. And in a way, in this level of intimacy, and as adults and not love sick teenagers, it was.

His strong dark features were peaceful. His black hair was tousled across his forehead and sticking every which way. His black eyebrows were calm, thick and, for once, quiet in their expression. Long dark lashes fluttered as he dreamed behind his eyelids. Her eyes traced down his cheeks, past his dark patch of beard, to the light and serene calm upon his partially open lips.

A flash of her dream played across her mind's eye as she drank in the man wrapped around her. Of the soft boy he had been. The boy who had saved her.

And here now, the man who had just saved her yet again.

He. was. beautiful.

Now, as ever.

At that thought, her dark mind shot to life, begging her to think, begging her to stop.

But it was too late and she easily dulled its protests to a whisper.

Maybe it was selfish. Quite obviously it was self destructive. *Stupid*, even.

But in this moment, all she wanted was him.

In fact, he was all she had wanted for the last 2,474 days.

Her shaky hand reached up to touch his face. Every nerve in her body jolted as her fingers landed tentatively on his scruffy cheek. She softly tested the waters of what it would feel like to thread her fingers through the short dark strands.

Mike stirred against her and Jane jerked her hand away guiltily. Her eyes widened in surprise, shaken out of her reverie as his eyes eased open and he joined her in the moment.

"Hi," he breathed, blinking against the light. His expression was soft and slightly confused as his eyes worked to focus on her.

Her voice didn't work to respond. It was lodged in her chest beneath

her heaving nervous breath.

He looked at her with wonder for a moment. Then abruptly, his eyes widened and he jerked up onto his elbow, pulling away from her as he frantically looked away, back to her, then away, then back again. He blushed furiously.

"Shit, I'm so sorry. You – you pulled in me. You were screaming and having a nightmare and I - I tried to wake you up and you grabbed my arm and you were screaming and I was just... I was just going to stay here until I could get my arm back and - and you calmed down but I - I guess I fell asleep and I - I mean," his eyes skipped back to her face, "Are you okay? I know last night was... really bad... and then with the nightmare you had I just didn't know and I was so worried and I - "

Mike Wheeler's trademark nervous ramble, on full display with his messy bed head and twisted shirt, was so impossibly disarming that she didn't even register the content of his words. An airy laugh escaped her and she dropped her hand on his to shut him up.

Mike's nervous eyes shot to her face at the sound of her laugh and he quieted, a shy embarrassed smile tugging across his lips as he looked down on her.

Then, his hand twitched beneath hers and his smile dropped, turning vulnerable as his eyes began to radiate with an unspoken yet deafening question.

Every part of her felt pulled to him like a magnet.

Every part of her knew she should be pulling away.

But she didn't have to make that impossible choice, because in that moment Mike's eyes went soft as he leaned over her, alarmingly close, wove his hand into her wild hair, and exhaled shakily against her lips, warm and electric, as he kissed her.

His lips felt like crackling fire in the cold, sending shots of heat all the way down her body as she quivered against him, effectively silencing all of the stupid pointless doubt that had screamed in her

mind. She ran her hand softly against his jaw. Her fingers found their way to the back of his neck and into the thick strands of his hair, remembering with a shuddering chill how amazingly wonderful it felt.

He moaned at her touch and his kiss grew hungrier. His tongue beckoned against her lips. She granted entry willingly, pulling him toward her as she tasted him with a frenzy that made her delirious.

He tasted like... Mike.

Memories shot from the recesses of her mind and magically became the present in a way that she had never even dared to dream.

At that, she lost herself. His hand blazed against the bare skin of her waist at the hem of her sweater. He pulled her flush against him as he pressed his weight into her. Her palms traced his once thin, now broad shoulders as his lips found their way to her neck, stopping on a spot near her collarbone that he seemed to remember like it was plotted on a map. She gasped and arched against him. His lips pressed a smile into her tender skin in reply.

They stayed that way for a long time, curled into each other's embrace, exploring one another in a way that seemed to transcend time. Until suddenly, he pulled away. His breath was labored and his eyes were lustrous as they drifted across her, making her blush in a way that matched her bruised lips.

"What?" she exhaled as he looked at her softly.

A blinding smile broke onto his face as he shook his head in bewilderment, his eyes crinkling in a way that made her heart explode.

"I just wanted to look at you," he said softly as he brushed stray strands of hair from her forehead.

"Oh"

"I just wanted to make sure you were real."

"I'm real."

"I know. It's just... hard to believe. That you're here. ...that I'm kissing you?"

He looked at her in a way she hadn't seen or felt in years. A pure innocence in his eyes, devoid of the difficulties that surrounded them. It gave her a dangerous thrill of hope. She felt tears well in her eyes.

"Mike..."

His hands cupped her face and his thumbs rubbed soft caresses against the curves of her cheekbones. Shaky breath exited his lips.

"I dreamed about you," he whispered, his voice heavy and overwhelmed in his admission. He leaned his forehead on hers. "I dreamed about you every night for two weeks before I saw you. I don't know how I knew you were here, but... I knew."

"Really?" she breathed, dumbfounded by his admission.

"I was supposed to find you.." His voice was so incredibly earnest as he stated it like a fact.

He pulled away, his eyes suddenly blazing with the next words he wanted to speak. Jane's heart began to beat nervously.

"Don't leave again?" His words were soft and sincere in his request.

All of the dark tar in her body suddenly awoke and choked her.

"I - "

Mike buried his face into her hair and pulled her close against him, making her gasp.

"Promise me you won't leave again," he whispered, his lips brushing the words against her ear, making her tremble.

It formed on her lips like a reflex before her coherent thoughts could catch her in the act.

"I promise."

She felt Mike's entire body shudder as he exhaled audibly against her neck before he shifted and crashed his lips fiercely back on hers.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

This chapter was a challenge. El's mental landscape can be a painful place to explore but I just love her so so much so I hope I was able to weave her complicated emotions in a way that was palpable to the reader. I would love to hear your thoughts. Thanks so much for reading - L -

Don't forget the Spotify playlist if you want to join along!

<https://open.spotify.com/user/laurawiese/playlist/538rIGfyj8dv6h7WZ0lj0d>

## 10. Chapter 10

A thick layer of armor had encapsulated his heart for years. Disappointment and angst made hard and turned into a shield. He knew, but would never admit, that it had grown out of her absence.

It had solidified slowly, imperceptibly, over the years, growing from his constant regret of not following her straight out of the window that night, and fed daily by an endless pining that he could not stop, no matter how hard he tried. It was finally made rigid after all of the agonizing nights in high school when he could almost feel her watching him, her static present against his skin as he fell asleep, slowly driving him insane until the moment during his senior year when he had stared into the empty air and screamed for her to stop.

He never felt her there again, and as a result the armor locked tightly against his heart that June in 1989. It was a bitter wall and it became his greatest defense against the world in the following years.

That very defense was dealt a fatal blow as his lips crashed against hers that December morning in 1993.

The familiarity of her body against his was jarring in the most overwhelming way. She felt like both a memory and a possibility. In the moment he could have convinced himself that he had held her every night for the last seven years, while at the same time every nerve in his body burst with the delicious intensity that came with touching this gorgeous woman with the most stunning eyes for the very first time.

Mike wasn't naïve. He was very well aware of the danger. Her face was plastered across every TV on the east coast. He had no idea what they were going to do or how they were going to do it.

And he knew... he might wake up any day to find her gone.

El coming back into his life was either going to be the best thing that had ever happened to him. Or it was going to hurt like absolute hell.

But that wasn't going to stop him. There was no stopping him. The



cascade of hope that came with holding El in his arms again was just too much for his rational mind to contend with. And he didn't want to interrupt it, because he couldn't remember the last time he had felt this... amazing wasn't a good enough word.

She was here. She was with him. In his arms.

He had a chance.

And she was so worth the risk.

Slowly, as the minutes passed the heat between them simmered and devolved into something softer, sweeter. She kissed him gently as his breath slowed, nipping at his lower lip while her fingers traced across his cheek, sending a shiver down his entire body. He pulled away ever so slightly and opened his eyes. She hummed against him. Her eyes remained closed.

Mike took the opportunity to fully observe El Hopper lying next to him in the bed.

Her hair was an absolute glorious mess, curls flying every which way, landing over her face and cascading across the pillow. He ran his thumb against the ridge of her jaw, luxuriating in the softness of a spot directly behind her ear. A once favorite location that he only remembered missing when he touched it again. Her cheeks had thinned out, the sweet roundness of her youth long gone, replaced with a beautiful and delicate angularity.

"El..." he breathed, for no reason other than to say her name.

Her dark lashes fluttered open. She looked at him with a silent intensity, so disarming and so incredibly... El. Deep hazel eyes that could rip straight through him and tell him everything he needed to know with just one look.

"Hi..." she sighed softly. Her lips turned up in her sweetest closed lipped smile. Her dimples on full display.

He found it hard to breathe.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

The moment shattered as El jumped in alarm.

"I'll get it," he whispered reassuringly. "It's probably just your sister. Slip under the covers just in case." El nodded as Mike extracted his arm from under her and crawled out of the bed.

His legs felt weak as he tested them for the first time, but the small potential of them being caught squatting in his neighbor's apartment made him alert enough to quickly move to the door. So, when he looked out of the peephole and saw the face of a sniffing ten-year-old girl on the other side, it was oddly a relief.

"My face... is on the TV again." Sev said with a tremble as he opened the door.

He groaned silently as their bleak reality rushed into the room.

Kali appeared in the doorway to his apartment. Her eyes were dark and calculating as she leaned against the door sill and sipped a cup of coffee.

"Good morning. Is my sister awake? I need to talk to her."

"I'm up." El's voice echoed glumly as her feet started to pad softly against the concrete. She arrived beside him, her sleeping clothes twisted and her hair a swirled mess. She snuck around him through the doorway and gave Sev a wide berth as she did so, not even so much as glancing at the girl.

Mike took a deep breath, trying with all of his might to bring his mind and body into the moment. He put his arm around the small girl's shoulders and gently led her into his apartment, following El.

"Did you know about this?" Kali asked El in a harsh whisper as she moved close to her and pointed to the TV screen. El's grainy face stared back at them just as it had the day before, making him wince.

El sighed as she nervously worked to tame her hair. "We saw it yesterday."

"And you didn't wake me?" Kali bit back.

El shrugged in annoyance. "You told me not to wake you!"

Kali glared at her sister. "I would have figured that having your face broadcasting on every TV in New York would have been an obvious exception. This is a pretty big complication."

"It's really not," El huffed, clearly frustrated. "My make up was severe and I was wearing the wig. I can go out like this from now on and absolutely no one will recognize me." She gestured to her massive mane of brown curls.

"You're not going anywhere," Kali replied quickly with a sneer.

"I didn't say I was. I said I could," El barked back with a tone that Mike had only ever heard her use with her Dad.

Kali took a sip of coffee and abruptly turned to Mike. "You. What do you know about this? Is there anything you can do about it?"

"Um..." Mike swallowed, taken aback as the intense woman put him on the spot. He let go of Sev's shoulders and crossed to his computer as Sev dashed back to the bed and threw herself under the covers. "I, um... I spent about three hours tracking it all through the servers last night. It's far past something I can contain at this point. I mean, I could probably do more once it simmers down and it stops being breaking news. But for now, no." Kali looked at him in a way that made him feel like he'd flunked a test. "But... um... there are other things we can do."

Kali waved her hand impatiently. "Go on."

Mike allowed his well-honed planning brain to kick into high gear as he put his thoughts in order from the night before. "Okay, so I was thinking about this last night and I have some ideas."

He bent over the desk and began to boot up his machines as he continued. "So, we clearly need to get the three of you out of the city. That's obvious." He typed a bit of code into the start screen as his lips revved up into a ramble, plans forming and spilling quickly from his mouth. "It'd probably be best to leave once the TV stuff dies down. We can stay here and lay low for the next week or two and hope this

leaves the news cycle. But we can't stay long before this building starts filling up with people again. But I, uh, I thought about that and I've done some thinking about where we can go next. I know some off the grid spots in Boston. They're pretty good, not quite this nice but we could make it work for a while. If you're up for it. I could still do this work there, so that would be great."

He quickly turned to gauge the girl's reactions and turned his thoughts on a dime when he noticed the less than positive looks in their eyes. "But.. you know, if we need something more remote we can go to my buddy's cabin on the Long Island Sound in Connecticut. Yeah, that could work. His family only uses it in the summer and it's really remote and away from everything. Kind of like your Dad's old place, El."

"And oh!" he exclaimed as he typed another line of code. "I was thinking we really need to work out some fake IDs for you, if you don't already have them. Do you have them? At least for Sev. She definitely doesn't have one, right?" Again, they didn't respond and continued to stare at him in a way that made him sweat. "And I mean real fakes. Real socials and name changes and all that. Birth certificates, the whole nine yards. Not like, shitty ones to get into bars," he joked to no reply. "You... Well, you know what I mean. Anyway, there's a guy who lives on the 4th floor who's made a fortune off of stealing identities and selling them, which I think is pretty shady but in this case I'm, well, I'm pretty glad I know him, right?" He typed in a final bit of code as the screen changed and he turned back to the girls again. "El, if you can break me into his apartment I can use his stuff and we could..."

His voice trailed off as the girls stared at him blankly.

"Um..." Mike stuttered. "So, what do you think?"

Kali regarded him for a moment, her mouth making the starts of words but not succeeding. Eventually, she shifted her gaze to El in confusion.

"Jane, what in the hell is he talking about?"

"I have no idea." El shrugged at her sister, obviously perplexed.

Mike suddenly felt like an idiot for reasons he couldn't even begin to comprehend.

Kali lowered her voice and spoke directly to El. "Jane, did you tell him anything about what we're doing here?"

El winced and ran her fingers yet again through her mass of hair. "I... I guess I didn't?"

"You had a day and a half and you didn't fill him in at all?" Kali asked, dumbfounded.

El cringed and rolled her eyes.

Kali rolled her own eyes in reply and turned to Mike, giving him a placating smile. "We do need your help, Mike. Obviously. But not to get out of New York. Well, at least not yet."

"Okay...?" Mike said slowly, the gears in his head turning, but not catching. "What do you need, then?"

"We need you to tell us everything you can about the New York lab."

The CD in Mike's brain skipped. "Why do you want to know about the lab? Don't you want to get away from the lab?"

"No," Kali replied, shaking her head slowly. "We want to get into the lab."

Mike's jaw fell slack. "Oh..."

The room was silent for a moment as his eyes fell on El. She avoided his gaze, her expression highly uncomfortable. Finally, she looked up and squirmed. "...I left that that part out, didn't I?"

"Yeah," Mike replied with unmasked surprise. "You definitely did."

"Well, it seems we have a lot to tell you, then," Kali sighed as she turned to the kitchen to get a chair.

"We should move to the other room," El whispered quickly as she cocked her head to the bed. Sev sniffled as she worked to pay

attention to a cartoon on the television.

"You two go. I'll meet you in there," Mike said as he nodded to the door. "I'll talk to Sev and make sure she's fine in here alone."

Kali cocked her eyebrow and looked at her sister in confusion.

"Believe me," El interrupted as she latched her hand around Kali's arm. "You want Mike to do it. Sev is in love with him." She shot Mike a grateful smile as she began to pull her sister to the door.

Mike crossed to the kitchen as the girls shut the door behind them. He quickly dug out the last Honey Bun and moved to the bed, hoping to make the interaction as quick as possible. His curiosity for what the girls had to tell him was simply overwhelming. Sev still had tear streaks down her face. He held out the sweet carefully and worked to muster up the kindest voice he could.

"Hey, Sev? We're going to the other room. We don't want to interrupt your cartoons with boring adult talk. Okay?"

The girl looked up at him and nodded as her fingers snatched the Honey Bun.

"You okay this morning?" he asked as he pulled the old quilt up over her legs.

She nodded and smiled slightly, her eyes still tight with visible worry. She reminded him so much of his little sister in that moment, though he expected, sadly, that she was even younger than Holly.

"It's going to be okay. Alright? You've got El, and Kali and me to keep you safe. We're going to fix this and you're not going to go back to the lab. Okay?"

She nodded yet again, this time with a little more softness to her eyes.

"Good," he replied, ruffling her short hair as he looked at the TV. "Rocky and Bulwinkle was one of my favorites when I was your age. Do you like it?"

"Yes. Funny," she replied.

"Okay, well... I'm going into the other room. If you need us come straight over. But don't leave this floor, okay? No going to the roof or downstairs. Got it?"

"Yes, Mike." she said quietly, her eyes still on the TV.

"Cool, can I get you anything else?" he asked.

"Mike." she replied.

"Yes?"

"No." She shook her head and pointed to the floor. "Mike."

Mike looked at the girl, perplexed, before he followed where she was pointing. An old tattered teddy bear was lying haphazardly by his feet. It was missing one eye and it looked like it hadn't been washed in years. It looked... familiar.

He bent down and picked up the bear. "Is this Mike?" he asked.

Sev nodded and held out her hand. He handed the bear to her slowly, his question feeling stupid in his mouth. "Did you name your bear after me?"

Sev shook her head as she took the bear and casually nuzzled it into her chest. "El's bear. Mine now."

A silent 'Oh' etched onto his lips as he processed her words. "And... El told you his name was... Mike."

Sev nodded once more, no longer paying him any mind as a commercial ended and her cartoon came back on.

Mike stood there dumbly and focused his wide eyes out of the window as he ran his hands through his hair, a stupid grin unexpectedly overtaking every part of him.

His skin suddenly felt dangerously hot.

It was the sweetest thing he had ever heard in his life.

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The second Kali and Sev's voices flooded into the room Jane's anxiety shot through the roof. It was a testament to how bad the circumstances were that she could go from the fierce intoxication that was kissing Mike to pure dread so quickly. It was like a boomerang circled back and hit her square in chest, almost making her feel ashamed for all of the absolute beauty that had just transpired in the bed. Almost.

Her head ached with residual pain from the night before, and the shadow of terror that had shrouded her while she fell asleep ebbed dangerously against her mind, asking for a second date.

But it was the look in Kali's eyes that tanked her into panic, grounding her back into the true reality of their circumstances for the first time in days. Jane had done her best to not think about the ambush or the escape since she had arrived at Mike's. It was a feat easily aided by the novelty of his presence. But it could not be avoided under the stern and seemingly angry frown on Kali's face.

She forced herself into the other apartment with lead feet, her sister following tightly on her heels.

"How did you just forget to tell him? What the hell were you doing while I was asleep?"

"Kali..." Jane warned with a groan.

Kali shut the door and looked her sister up and down. A small smirk suddenly played on her lips, taking Jane aback.

"How long did it take for him to kiss you? An hour? Ten minutes?" Kali pressed.

Jane hid behind her hand as she felt her face flush. It was absolutely useless to lie to Kali Prasad. "You...interrupted it..."

"Ohhh," Kali replied with an amused nod. "So that explains why your



hair looks like a lion's mane."

Jane didn't respond. Instead she walked away from her sister, threw herself on the couch, and pulled her knees tightly to her chest. Kali took a seat close to her, clearly ready to continue her badgering.

"If I remember correctly, I thought he had a girlfriend. Didn't we have a 'thing' about that just a few days ago?"

Jane grimaced as Kali touched on the absolute last part of the whole Mike situation that she wanted to think about. "He did," she said quietly through gritted teeth.

"So...did he call her the second you got here and end it or something?"

"Kind of...I-I kind of ran into her on the stairs after he broke up with her... right when we arrived."

"What?!" Kali laughed in a way that knocked Jane out of her gloom. Her laugh was eerily light. Almost girly. Jane had the sudden sensation that they were gossiping. Kali shifted on the couch, and leaned closer to her sister. "So... you're telling me that he told you we were in danger, told you to come here, and then instantly broke up with his girlfriend somewhere in that twenty minute time frame before you came in the door?"

"Yes?"

"Well, shit." Kali said with a whistle as she leaned back into the cushions. "Fuck, that's romantic. He's worse than you."

Jane watched her sister in shock as she uttered the absolute last words she would have ever expected her to say.

Kali seemed to note the surprise on her Jane's face. In response, she bit her lip thoughtfully and eyed Jane before she spoke.

"Okay, I can't believe I'm about to say this, but..." she exhaled loudly. "I mean, obviously, what you're doing is very stupid and insanely reckless. And if you'd asked me a week ago 'Kali, what do you think about Mike Wheeler being involved in your plans?' it would have

been a strong 'NO.' But..." she said as her dark eyes widened with a sense of awe. She began to tick off her points on her fingers, "The guy in the other room is housing us without question, even though we're headline news fugitives. He seems to have insane access to information we could never even dream of accessing on our own. He floored me with that offer of fake identification. An offer we are definitely taking, by the way." She added as she poked El's leg incessantly. "Plus, he's loyal, and he obviously still in love with you."

"Kali...!" Jane sputtered.

"Oh come on," Kali continued without pause. "He pretty much just volunteered to run away with you when he was telling us his crackpot plan. He's an incredible asset. And weirdly, I trust him."

Jane was rendered speechless. A grateful smile dared to rise to her lips.

"But..."

Jane groaned as the other shoe dropped.

"You cannot get too attached, Jane," Kali flipped into her trademark scold as her words stabbed like a hot knife into Jane's chest. "This could get very messy, very fast. It's already insanely messy. We are so close to finishing this and I will not have him, or your emotions, standing in the way of any of our plans. So, I'm not going to get in your way. And he can be a part of the plan all he wants, as long as you're okay with that and he follows my lead. He's insanely useful." Kali dropped her hand softly on Jane's leg, "And maybe, just maybe, we'll come out of this on the other side and you two can have your happily ever after. Who knows. That would be nice. But Jane." Her voice slowed and took on a dark tone that made Jane shrink into the couch. "You know the chances of that. So, you need to decide how you're going to handle this, and you must make plans for the worst case scenario... Even if that means he's in harms way. Or if it means we leave. Without him. You know that. Promise me that."

Jane swallowed tightly against her rising pain as Kali spoke the hard truth she had been trying so hard to avoid all morning, from the very first second she had awoken in his arms.

"Jane? Promise me."

"I. Know. That." Jane choked, tears brimming in her eyes. Her bottom lip quivered as she looked out the window. Her mind turned over her sister's words as she avoided her gaze. "Just..." she stuttered, finally forcing herself to look at her sister. "Please give me a day or two. Let me have this, for like, a day before I ask myself what the hell I'm going to do."

Kali nodded. "Fair," she said as her finger traced light circles against Jane's knee.

"Is it what you thought it'd be? Seeing him again?"

Jane felt the first tear fall. "It's better."

The door opened and Mike entered the room, a small secret smile playing on his lips as he grabbed the chair from the desk, turned it backwards and sat, leaning against the chair back, next to the couch.

Jane batted the errant tear from her face and worked to mask her emotions as she turned to face him. His eyes were expectant, kind and locked on hers. His hair was still dangerously tousled from her hands just fifteen minutes prior, an experience that suddenly felt like it existed in a different dimension.

"Okay. I guess I haven't told you why we're here."

Jane started slowly, trying to thread the story as smoothly as she could as she fought to keep her voice steady. "We came to New York a few weeks ago because Sev found me in the Void. She'd been assigned to track me. I was able to track her to this general location, but they have a concealer in the lab so we don't know the exactly where the lab is. Anyway, I helped her escape by speaking with her in the Void. I'm glad she tracked me, it was kind of a blessing in disguise, because we'd been trying to find Pa... Brenner for awhile. We think he's here from what Sev told me, but we can't track him because of the concealer. We're also pretty sure this is the only lab left. We ended the other lab in Philadelphia a couple of years back."

"Oh! I know about that. I purged a lot of classified documents about

that one." Mike interjected with a jump, seeming oddly excited at the mention of Philadelphia.

Jane's voice halted as her stomach churned in response. "Do you still have that documentation so I can see it?"

"Yeah, I keep everything on a hard drive. I can show you anything I've purged about you, if you want to see," he said with a reassuring smile that made her warm despite her reservations.

"Right, thanks," she replied timidly before continuing. "Um... Well, like I said, we're pretty sure New York is the only other lab. So..." she forced out the final words. "We're ending it."

Mike's eyes narrowed. "Ending it how, exactly?"

"I'm not going to sugar coat this for you, Mike," Kali cut in, much to Jane's relief. "You need to know what you're getting into. We're here to kill Brenner and the remaining Projects."

Mike was quiet for a moment as he looked between the girls. Jane's stomach tightened painfully, a Plan B struggled to form in her mind for the impending moment when Mike would clearly realize what he had gotten himself into and would ask them to leave.

After what felt like an hour, he simply nodded. "Got it. And what do you need from me?"

"Um..." Jane replied in surprise. "You're okay with this?"

"Yes." Mike replied without hesitation. "Taking out the man that stole your life from you? And that little girl's in there?" he added as he pointed to the door. "I'd be honored to help. What do you need?"

Jane took a deep breath. "You're sure."

Mike replied with a look of sincerity that almost broke her. "Yes. I promise."

Jane felt her body course with a rush of something deep, a word she wasn't ready for. Mike looked at her with the same unflinching loyalty apparent on his face that she had once known so well, in

another life, when she had leaned on him instinctively for strength. His eyes zeroed in on her in a way that made her feel as though the world had shrunk down to just the two of them.

Kali exhaled a surprised laugh and cut through the moment as she addressed Mike. "So, you're harboring fugitives, you crack servers for a living, and you're okay with participating in a murder plot. Do you do have any regard for the law?"

"Not really," Mike replied with a casual shrug, his eyes not leaving Jane's as though he was speaking directly to her. "I developed a strong distrust for the government at, oh...about age twelve." Jane felt her lips turn into a shy smile. Mike returned the smile before shifting to address Kali. "So, whatever you need, I'm here to help. What do you need from me?"

Kali nodded in confirmation, seemingly impressed. "We're very appreciative. Believe me. I think your skills are going to make it so we can be careful in our planning. Which we really want to do after the... the causalities of last time."

"Causalities?" Mike repeated, his voice changing abruptly in tone.

Both of the girls stopped in their tracks and Jane's blood turned instantly cold. She looked at her sister nervously. Kali mirrored her gaze.

"That... um... that wasn't mentioned in the documentation you found?" Jane asked carefully.

Mike shook his head. "No? All that was mentioned was that it was a botched attempt to capture you, but you both escaped. There wasn't any mention of anyone else..." he looked back and forth between them as his face fell. "You lost someone."

Jane looked to Kali, unsure of how to answer. Kali looked ashen, her eyes glazed with the threat of tears. She had clearly not been expecting to have to talk about it. She swallowed hard before she finally spoke. "We lost four. Everyone."

Mike's jaw went slack and Jane averted her gaze.

She suddenly wanted to confess everything to him. To tell him of the whole deception that had brought along the tragedy. She wanted to explain the way he had looked in the vision they had planted in her mind. Sickly, broken, covered in bruises and blood. His beautiful chocolate eyes so real in their terror, so horrifyingly easy to believe. She wanted to tell him how her whole life had changed that night. How deeply it had broken her. How for six months she had done nothing but laid silently on the dirty floor of an old abandoned Allentown train station that they'd holed up in, unable to move, speak, or eat as the guilt of their deaths consumed her.

But there was no way she could. Saying it out loud would break her yet again.

The room was silent for a moment, each of them lost in their own thoughts until Mike finally spoke. His voice thick and resolute. "I will do anything I can to help you. No matter how long it takes. I'm so sorry that happened to you."

Jane dared to look at him. His look burned a hole through her, intent, dedicated, and full of so much care. But emotions had changed swiftly from a few minutes ago, and this time it did not bring her comfort. Rather, it consumed her with great fear as her traitorous mind disfigured her memory of the night and added his dead body on the ground next to each of her friends.

Kali spoke up and forced the conversation forward. Jane gratefully sat back and warred with her escalating thoughts as Kali and Mike laid out the research that needed to be completed. It included the address of the lab. Interior layout maps of the building. Any information on Brenner that Mike could find, as well as information on the three Projects still inside. And finally, a cursory look to see if he could guarantee that the New York lab was the only one still in existence.

But she didn't hear much of the conversation, and the tones of his voice suddenly felt like knives. Each word he spoke one more reminder that he was here, mixed up in the most dangerous moment she had been in in years.

It's not like it was the first time, she tried to remind herself. He had

been glued by her side through the beginning, unendingly loyal to her regardless of the sacrifice.

They weren't thirteen anymore, though. The grand black and white proclamations that had once felt so absolute, so real, and so easy to keep felt almost silly now. They had been built on a beautiful naïveté. When they had had no real understanding of the consequences that one wrong move could bring upon them. Consequences she now knew far too well.

She felt sick.

"Jane...Jane?" Kali's voice called her back to the room and away from her thoughts, which she knew were now written all over her face.

"Yes?" she asked shakily.

"What happened?" Kali asked, as though she was repeating the question. Jane looked between Kali and Mike and found both of them looking at her with intense worry.

"Uh... what happened when?" she asked.

"I just told Kali about last night," Mike interjected nervously. An apology lacing his words.

Oh. That.

The only thing that could make her feel worse.

The feelings of what happened the night before rushed in and layered on top of the sheer nightmare going on in her thoughts. She started to feel herself shake..

"You mean Sev."

Mike nodded.

"Um..." she started as she rubbed her eyes. "She... I don't really know how to explain it. She... she froze me?"

Kali's hand returned to Jane's leg in a soft support. "What does that

mean?"

It felt like pulling a splinter out of her gut to talk about it. "I don't know how, but... Well, there was a snowball fight on the roof and I tried to toss one with my mind and she-" Jane exhaled as she struggled to string the sentence together. She couldn't remember the last time she had had such a hard time speaking. "It felt like she just turned me off. I couldn't move. I - I couldn't even talk." She cursed inwardly as she felt a tear cut down her cheek.

Kali looked like she'd seen a ghost. "Holy shit, Jane."

"Yeah..." she croaked as she pulled her legs more deeply into her chest. "It was... bad."

"You have to talk to her," Kali instructed.

Jane flinched as she looked at her sister with derision.

"No Jane, listen to me," Kali said insistently, her voice lighter and almost... optimistic? "Hear me out. She's so much like you in her powers that maybe you can do that, too. You just didn't know it"

"I can do that," Jane bit back. Of course she could. She had done it to three Projects in Philadelphia at once without so much as a nosebleed. To be honest it had been so natural that she hadn't given any thought to it. Until now. That wasn't the problem.

She batted away another tear.

"I just didn't know it could be done to me."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thanks for your patience! This one took me a bit longer but the bonus of that is I wrote enough for this chapter that I pretty much have the next one done. So look for that Thursday or Friday :)

If you're digging the vibes of this story, come join me on the playlist: <https://open.spotify.com/user/laurawiese/playlist/538rIGfyj8dv6h7WZ0lj0d>



## 11. Chapter 11

Mike was so incredibly grateful for the distraction that was his computer. He had spent the rest of the day glued to his screen, sifting through everything he could find for Kali's requests. His understanding of the information available at his fingertips had been blown wide open. He couldn't believe how narrow his scope had been.

Endless classified information about the Project had been sitting directly under his nose, spanning far past anything that had ever touch him or El. Brenner was indeed registered as the Chief Scientist at the New York lab, and the girls seemed to be correct in their assertion that it was the final lab in existence. Vague information about the Projects was given in terminology he didn't quite understand, but he expected Kali or El could decipher. He pulled the documentation to his hard drive in droves as he moved through the servers.

Then there was the logistical information that was an absolute treasure trove and made his mind run with half-hatched potential plans. Labeled maps of the interior of the building, dated as recently as six months prior. Remote access portals to the entire operating matrix of the building, including the security system, the lights, everything. Work schedules and contact information for each person that worked at the lab. The PR access portal that pushed information out to other departments...

It was almost too easy, he thought with a proud smile, as he'd taken notes on the security system. For such a classified department, they should have been embarrassed by their technology acumen. It was 1993, and one by one government servers were becoming harder to crack, but it seemed the Department of Energy was a little too low on the priority list, lucky for him.

As the hours had dragged on, though, his focus had waned and his eyes had gone glassy. Words and numbers on the screen began to flood together as his mind wandered back to the other room. Back to her. And back to the uncomfortable nagging sensation that had been raging behind his sternum throughout the day.

El's face had always been so open. Back in the day he'd been able to read her without a single word. It was like entire monologues were written into her transparent features. That part of her had not changed in the slightest.

So, the heartbreaking and pained expression that had seemed permanently fixed on her face throughout the day, from the very moment they'd left the bed, made him incredibly disconcerted. The more he mulled it over the more it became the only thing he could think about.

She hadn't looked at him any more than she'd had to that afternoon, and it was clear she was in some kind of complicated pain. He'd wanted to reach out. He'd wanted to step up in the ways he always used to. And in the beginning of the day he'd tried. But he found himself hesitating more and more as the hours passed and he continued to learn about the girl's dire circumstances and the path that had led them to his door.

He squirmed with worry as he replayed the first moments of the morning in combination with how she'd been acting.

Had he moved too fast?

It was likely, he thought with a sudden dark laugh as his stomach tanked with nerves. She had been at his home for less than two days. She had been back in his life for less than a week. She had been gone for enough years to make it feel like they were strangers. She was literally on the run for her life.

Yet, his impulsiveness had overtaken him.

In the moment it had seemed like the only possible decision, to kiss her. The blazingly open look she'd given him as he had looked down on her was so warm and just simply... beautiful. She'd looked at him in the way that he'd been waiting for for years; and he'd lost himself, in that moment lost in a vacuum as though the rest of the world didn't exist at all. He couldn't deny that as he had asked her not to leave again, a brazen request that he was growing to regret more and more as the hours progressed, it had come from a place of pure selfish hopefulness without a single regard for reality.

What he'd learned from her and Kali as they briefed him throughout the day, however, made him feel intensely guilty for ignoring those circumstances and putting his own wants first. It was likely, he realized with embarrassment, that what she needed now was a friend and a safe landing. Not a pining ex who wanted to make it about him.

He grimaced at the acidic feeling in his stomach as he felt the overwhelming need to apologize.

Kali and Sev's soft breathing echoed from the bed in the far corner as Mike stood up and stretched his back. He quietly went through the steps to turn off his computer for the night before he dragged himself to the other apartment, his nerves absolutely rankled.

He slipped discreetly through the door, hoping he wouldn't wake her if she too was asleep. Instead, he found El sitting alone on the couch, curled up into herself. Only one lamp was on. It dusted the room in a dim orange glow. The radio, playing Top 40, suddenly clicked to an alt rock station as she cocked her head. The chorus of 4 Non Blondes "What's Up" began to bounce off of the concrete walls and she laid her head back down on top of her knees.

She shifted quickly as he clicked the door shut. She batted her hand at her eyes and stood up to face him. Her hair was slightly damp from a shower and she was wearing a blue long sleeved tee and open legged grey sweatpants, clearly ready for bed. Her face was slightly puffy, making him feel another notch worse as he realized she'd been crying.

"Hey," she said with a shaky smile.

"Hi..." he replied. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she waved her hand in the air dismissively. "Just- you know... Long day."

An awkward silence descended upon them and he felt trapped in her gaze. Her eyes were calculating, as though she was ready to deliver words she'd been practicing. Mike's stomach tightened. He *had* fucked up.

"Listen -"

"- Listen"

They both laughed apprehensively.

"You first," Mike said.

"Okay." El stuttered as she began to toy nervously with a necklace beneath her shirt. "It's just... I know we dumped a lot on you today. And I want you to know that if it's too much or you don't want to be involved, that's entirely okay. I don't want you to feel pressured into anything, especially now that you know what we're trying to do."

"Oh..." Mike's eyebrows knitted in confusion, supremely surprised by the topic that was bothering her. "I want to do this. I *really* want to do this. You don't have to worry about that at all."

El sighed and didn't respond. Her eyes darted out of the dark window. "It's just really dangerous and I don't want -"

"So?" he interrupted her with a shrug as he crossed a little deeper into the apartment. "That doesn't bother me. I just need you to trust me on that."

She looked back at him after a moment and nodded. "Okay."

Nothing about her seemed to have relaxed at this words, making his nervousness rise.

"Look," Mike started, "I know today has been... a lot. And I just... I don't want to make things more confusing or difficult for you." He scratched his neck as she looked at him anxiously. "So I'm - I'm sorry if I did that this morning."

"What?" El's eyes widened in surprise as she shook her head. "No... I... Mike, that's not what I'm talking a-

"- I'm just saying..." He talked over her, his face hot as a wave of fear rushed through him. "I don't know what I'm saying, really," He took a deep breath and worked to slow down his words. "I didn't really realize how much pressure you were under until I talked to you and

your sister today. I want to help you. I can help and I want to and I'm going to. I one hundred percent mean that. But I don't want to overwhelm you if that's not what you want."

El shook her head and put her hand up. "Mike -"

"I'm sorry." Mike stuttered again, talking faster now as he continued to try to stumble on the right words. "I'm sorry if I rushed things. There's so much I don't know. About you, and about everything you've been through and I should've -"

"Mike" she interrupted forcefully.

"Yeah?"

"It's okay," El said quietly, her look suddenly soft and amused. She shook her head. "That wasn't my problem today. I'm sorry if you thought it was. It wasn't you."

"Oh," Mike replied lamely as he felt his chest unclench with massive relief. "Okay."

They stared at each other in silence for a minute. Mike sighed out a laugh. "What are you doing right now?"

El shrugged and gestured around the room. "This?"

"Okay," Mike replied nervously. "Can I join you?"

El nodded, "Yeah, of course."

"Cool." Mike said as he walked into the kitchen in order to give himself something to do to burn off his nerves. "So, here's something I don't know about you," he called over his shoulder as he opened the refrigerator. "Do you drink?"

El's soft laugh filled the room. "Yes. I drink."

Good, because he seriously needed one.

He found a half empty box of beer at the bottom of the refrigerator and returned to the sofa. He handed El a can of Bud Light and

popped his open as he sat toward the opposite end of the couch from her.

"Do you just want to just drink beers and talk like normal people do under normal circumstances when the world isn't burning down?" Mike asked jokingly.

El smiled his favorite shy smile as she laughed. He was stunned to find it put him at ease instantly. "Yes. That sounds amazing."

He held his beer up hesitantly and reached over to the middle of the couch toward her. "Cheers?"

"Cheers," she replied softly as she clinked cans with him. They each took a drink.

"What do you want to talk about?" Mike asked after a moment, "We've got years of ground we could cover tonight."

El laid her head back against the sofa cushion, thinking for a moment as she sipped her beer.

"You went to MIT?" she asked after a second, eyes glancing back to him.

Good, easy topic.

"Yeah. I graduated last May."

"It's always where you'd wanted to go to school." she mused as he took a drink. "I'm glad that happened for you."

Mike felt his face flush. "You remembered where I'd wanted to go to school?"

"Of course I did," she replied in surprise as she raised her head to look at him directly. Her expression was incredulous, as though she was slightly hurt that he'd think she would have forgotten. "You and Dustin talked about going to MIT all the time. You even made up that nerdy song about it that you'd sing when you didn't want to do homework and had to make yourself do it."

"Oh god, I forgot about that." Mike groaned as his hand fell on his face. "That's embarrassing."

El laughed. "Yeah, it was a bit embarrassing," she jokingly agreed. "Did Dustin go, too?"

Mike nodded, "Yeah. He and I are really close now. He was a biology major and I was computer science so we didn't overlap at all but we roomed together on and off. He's still in Boston, actually, getting his masters. So he comes down here every couple months."

"Cool," she replied after a moment. Silence fell over the sofa again. He watched her as she thought.

Finally, she softly asked, "Tell me a college story, I guess?"

Mike felt the knot in his stomach slowly untangle as they drank and settled into conversation. The orange glow of the lamp played softly off of her skin as she nursed her beer and intently listened to him talk about his college years. As the minutes progressed it all started to feel a little bit... ordinary. And that was an immense relief.

"Yeah, but I didn't really get into the college party scene at all." he continued as he returned to the couch with his second beer and placed one of the coffee table for her when she was ready for it. "I was kind of locked in a basement coding for four years straight. I don't know, I was a pretty full on nerd."

"Shocking," she teased with a crooked smile.

"Hey!" he replied, taken aback by her tone. She laughed in response and hid her smile in her beer can as he sat back down. "Sometimes Dustin would drag me out! He had all of these pre-med friends. It's crazy, you'd think it'd be the opposite, but pre-med kids party harder than anyone I've ever met. Those mornings after were the worst."

Jane laughed and nodded. "Yeah, that was the way Axel was. Once I got old enough he would take me with them out to all of these punk clubs. This was a few years in, things were pretty safe at one point. He got me a fake ID and everything," she added. "Turns out I can handle my liquor pretty well, though, actually." Jane's face suddenly

flushed, "Except for that one time that I, um...I was smashed and I was on the edge of a mosh pit and this guy groped me and I wasn't thinking. I um... I kinda lost control and full on threw him into a wall. I freaked out because I thought I'd killed him." she added with a dark laugh, her face looking guilty. "Everyone around was so drunk, though, that no one knew who did it or how it happened and, well, the entire mosh pit kind of turned into a brawl because of it."

Mike choked on his beer. "Oh shit. Yeah, that's a much more hardcore story than any I have. That guy totally deserved it, though. So good for you."

"Yeah, you're right." she said with a shrug as she shot him a knowing look. "Don't fuck with Jane Hopper. It won't end well for you."

Mike's laughter exploded from him. She played with the tab of her beer can as she bit back a smile.

"Can I ask you something?" he said as his laughter finally quelled. "It's been kind of fascinating me."

"Sure." she replied, looking back up to meet his eye.

"It's just... Your speech. It's perfect now. And you talk a lot more. What changed?"

El's eyes lit up in a blazing thank you. "Really?"

"Yeah," Mike nodded. "Talking to you, it's... different than it used to be."

El was positively beaming as he said it, and something rumbled deep in his chest in response. She shifted on the couch to face him directly, her knee filling the space between them. She leaned forward as she talked.

"It was Dottie." El started. "Dottie really loved reading and we didn't have much to do for the first couple of years, other than hide out. They were really close on our tails for the first bit," she added with a casual nature that was so bizarre given the topic. "So we hid out and she and I read everything we could get her hands on. She had me read aloud to her every day and helped me with my pronunciation



and grammar and all of that. I swear one time she made me read a microwave instructional book because it was the only things she could find." El chuckled, her eyes misty as she thought about her friend. "She was amazing with words and a really good teacher. She was even better at defining things than you were."

"I'm insulted." he replied with mock insult.

El looked at him and nodded in grave agreement as she reached for her second beer. "You should be insulted."

He wasn't kidding when he'd said it. Talking with El was the biggest change of all. More than the age, or the length of her hair, or the darkness that was more apparent in her eyes.

She was *teasing* him. She had *never* teased him.

...And he *loved* it.

"Anyway," she said quickly, a tinge of red budding in her cheeks. "So yeah. I did a ton of reading up until a couple years ago."

"Like what? Any favorites?" he asked, trying to get his mind back on the topic.

"Um..." she cringed as she bit her lip. She met his eye nervously as she said, "I... really like Danielle Steel books."

Mike groaned and rolled his eyes, "You would."

"Yeah," she replied with a self deprecating shrug. "I would. And... fantasy books, too. I love Lord of the Rings. That's probably my favorite."

"What?" he exclaimed with surprise as his favorite book fell from her mouth. "Really?"

"Yeah." She nodded. She eyed him shyly before she continued. "It reminded me of you, actually. Of those campaigns you used to build and all those big sweeping stories you made up. It was nice. I've read it at least seven times."

Mike felt himself blush as his chest warmed and he avoided her eyes. "That... might be the nicest compliment I've ever received."

---

Jane felt like her head was swimming. She had only had three beers so she was simply operating under a healthy buzz. That wasn't the main culprit of her light headedness. It was the laughter that had caused it. After two hours her stomach hurt and her jaw ached from the incessant giggles that Mike had elicited from her as he told story after story, becoming more and more animated with each one as though her laughter fed him.

If you had tried to remind her that she'd been crying just a couple of hours earlier, she wouldn't have believed you.

If you had told her that Mike had come into the room rambling like a nervous mess a couple of hours ago, she wouldn't have believed that either.

Being nestled on the sofa chatting about old times with Mike felt bizarrely and amazingly *normal*. The radio played in the background as she hung on his every word. He was currently regaling her with the on-again-off-again odyssey that was Max and Lucas's relationship. She felt blissfully nostalgic as Mike spun the story, his gestures all over the place as he threw in the most specific details. She had a thrilling sensation like they were back in his basement after freshman year, sharing sodas on the brown threadbare couch.

It felt amazing. Bittersweet? Yes. But absolutely amazing.

She realized she'd lost the thread of what he was saying for a moment. She had gotten lost in just watching him talk. His cheeks were flushed and he seemed more relaxed than he'd been since she'd arrived at his home. A permanent smile was plastered onto his face and his eyes twinkled when she laughed.

The buzzy sensation in her body allowed the endless purring in her chest to take the lead, without competition. The sensation felt so pronounced, aided by the alcohol, almost tangible in the air between

them. It had pulled her slowly closer to him, like an undeniable hook reeling her in, as the hours had passed. She had at some point turned her whole body to face him, her hair was now brushing against his arm, which was outstretched on the back of the couch behind her. And as the third beer kicked in she found herself laying her hand on his thigh when he made her laugh, and every so often putting the weight of her head against his arm.

It was a new interaction, so different from when they had been kids, and it coursed through her like little shocks of excitement.

"And then she slapped her."

"She didn't!" Jane giggled as her hand shot over her mouth in surprise.

"Yeah," Mike nodded fervently, his dark eyes wide with mirth. "Max slapped the girl right across the face in front of the entire Prom, grabbed Lucas's hand, and dragged him out of the gym."

"Oh my god, Max!" Jane squealed as she dropped her head against Mike's bicep for what felt like the fiftieth time in the last thirty minutes.

"Yeah. It was insane. Lucas's eyes almost fell out of his head. She got suspended for three days and paraded around the school when she got back telling everyone she had no regrets. This was around the... fifth time they broke up? Which I guess made that the sixth time they got back together?"

"What time are they on now?" Jane asked.

Mike looked up at the ceiling like he was trying to do complicated math. "You know, at this point I have no idea. This time they've been back together for... about a year? Which, come to think of it, is kind of a record for them. They got back together over Christmas break last year when we were back home. They'd been broken up for most of college."

"That's nice." El replied as she sat up.

He smiled at her as his voice trailed off. He took a sip of beer,

allowing enough silence for an errant thought to flit through her mind, one that hit her harder than she would have expected and caused an uncomfortable sensation to crawl through her body.

She swallowed tentatively. "Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Sure," he replied, looking back at her casually.

She felt so stupid for caring. It had been so long. I obviously didn't matter at all. But..."Who did you take to prom?"

It was though her question made the composition of the air around them shift. He looked up at her in surprise, and was silent for a long moment. His eyes slowly changed. The delight they had held seconds before washed away and was replaced with an unnamed melancholy.

"Sorry," she cut in, instantly regretting her question. "Did I say something wrong?"

Mike sighed nervously and shook his head. "No, it's not that. I - I didn't take anybody, El."

"Oh," she breathed, confusion knitting her brow as she tried to make sense of the moment.

He seemed to contemplate his words as his gaze settled on the small space between them. She watched him as his cheeks flushed. His voice was so quiet when he finally spoke that she had to lean in, as though he was telling her a secret.

"I was waiting for you to come back." he said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Jane was quiet for a moment as an odd sensation crept into her chest. "...That was over two years after I left..."

His dark brown eyes flitted up to hers, filled with emotion, before he quickly looked away. "Trust me, I'm aware of that."

He didn't need to explain it any further in words. The sensation of his pain hit her like a truck. It was palpable, emanating from his skin as he sat next to her. Released within him like a simple trip wire she

hadn't known to avoid.

And she had no idea what to do, because she had caused every ounce of it.

Duran Duran's Ordinary World began to play from the radio as a desperate urge bloomed within her.

"Will you dance with me?" Jane asked quietly, her hand slipping into his softly.

Mike let out a surprised laugh, "What?"

She tried to keep her voice steady as she shrugged. "I missed Prom. I want to make it up to you."

A shy and almost embarrassed smile ghosted over Mike's lips, but he nodded. He knocked back the last of his beer and placed the can on the table as he allowed her to pull him up from the sofa.

She led them tentatively through the dim room, her feet cold against the concrete, his hand almost feeling like it was shaking within hers. She stopped at an open spot on the floor near the bed, turned to him and wrapped her arms around his neck, sending him a shy smile. The ends of his hair tickled her fingers at the back of his neck. He was tentative as his arms wrapped around her waist. She jerked her head slightly to turn up the music. Slowly, she felt him relax against her as she felt his chin rest softly against her hair.

They stayed that way for a while, turning circles, their faces obscured from each other within the embrace. Her emotions grew within her, thick and confusing. Holding him only seemed to make it more intense.

Suddenly, he pulled her in closer and she willingly dropped her cheek to his chest. His scent cascaded over her. She breathed against him as it fogged her brain, still so much the same. It mixed dangerously with her emotions, causing them to crash over her with an intensity that threatened to knock her over.

The magic of scent memory made her sixteen again and she gasped, tears welling in her eyes as she pressed against Mike's chest. She felt

as though she was once again taking her final breaths against him, trying to memorize him and remember him forever, that spring night in his bedroom. Hot tears began to streak down her face and fall onto his shirt. She felt his arms tighten around her in response. She choked as the words came.

"I'm so sorry, Mike."

"What are you sorry for?" he asked with a tentative whisper.

"I - didn't want to go."

"I know," he replied softly. She felt his hand enter her hair, his fingers tracing small circles against her scalp.

She sighed and leaned into him for comfort for a long moment, simply breathing in his scent, simply trying to remember what year it was. "I never got over it."

The words fluttered from her lips without thought, nothing more than a pure fact of her existence.

At her words Mike's arm loosened its hold around her waist and his feet stopped moving. She could feel his breathing deepen against her cheek. She looked up to find him gazing down at her. His look arrested her with its intensity, a nervous question seared in his eyes. "Do you mean you never got over *leaving*? Or you never got over *me*?"

Jane's heart leapt in sadness.

"You." she said simply.

It was the easiest answer she had ever given in her life.

She felt all of the air exit Mike's body in a swift exhale. His eyes fluttered shut and he bit his lip. A tight pained smile appeared in his lips and mixed with an expression of grief as he opened his eyes to look at her again. He blinked back tears.

"I tried, Eleven." His voice was vulnerable and exposed in a way she had only heard it once before. The moment stood still as her heart beat frantically. "I tried so hard to get over you. And...nothing

worked. Nothing." He exhaled shakily as he shook his head and grazed his fingers through her hair. "I never got over you at all."

"Mike..."

She wasted no time as she instinctively pulled him down by his collar and kissed him hard. He moaned against her, a tear dropping from his eye onto her left cheek as he pulled her tightly into him.

It was so different from when they had kissed in the morning. Honestly, it was so different from any kiss they had ever shared in their lives.

It was raw. Painful. Filled with so much they didn't know how to say.

It was medicine.

Mike's other hand found its way into her hair. His fingers dancing lightly against her.

"I love it when you do that," she whimpered, completely out of control of her words.

"I know," his muffled words vibrating on her mouth. "I remember."

The final defensive wall inside of her crashed down as a rush of melancholic euphoria overtook her.

Every moment of the last week flooded through her mind. His unmistakable voice cutting through the rumble of the train as he screamed her old name, and the life changing sensation that had coursed through her as it hit her ears. How he looked when she finally found him, exhausted yet ecstatic after a sleepless night of keeping her safe, as he had done *so many times*, working diligently behind the scenes to afford her safety, despite the fact that he might never see her again. The way he held her as though she was so absolutely precious when she burst through his door after their escape, safe only because of him.

Every memory of the last week had been so overwhelmingly... Mike.

And in return Jane felt a sensation she never thought she'd fully feel

again.

*She felt like El.*

Checkmate.

Her mind officially surrendered, laying down its arms, to the longing in her heart.

El felt weak as she collapsed into him and deepened their kiss, holding onto him for dear life. One of his arms swooped under her and gripped her by the waist, pulling her in firmly to bear her weight against his body.

"I missed your lips," he breathed against her as his hand raked through her hair.

She rested her forehead against his and hummed airily in response as she ghosted her hands across his shoulders. "I missed everything about you."

Mike inhaled sharply at her words.

"El..."

She felt his other hand leave her hair and wrap around her thin frame before her feet lifted from the ground, as though she weighed nothing at all. She felt like she was floating as his lips returned to hers softly and he carried her backwards, collapsing them onto the bed.

Her hand cupped his cheek greedily as she pulled him deeper into her. He followed willingly, their legs tangling as his weight pressed against her.

She pulled away breathlessly and traced her lips across his jaw, wanting to experience every inch of him with an intensity that she had never felt before. Wanting to take away every ounce of pain she had caused him. Wanting to melt away every single one of the years that had been lost between them.

His breath pulsed against her ear as she stopped at the base of his ear. His head bucked back at the sensation. He shifted and caught her



lips boldly.

She could not think straight.

Her movements became frenetic as she fingered the base of his shirt and inched it up his body. He suddenly sat up, vigorously tore it over his head and tossed it to the floor. El pulled him back down forcefully as her palms eagerly found their way onto the canvas of his bare shoulders. Mike snaked his arm around the small of her waist and enveloped her fully up against him. A small airy sigh fluttered from her in response, and she could almost taste his smile against her mouth in response.

His hand began to course down the outline of her body, stopping at the tip of her hipbone. His fingers began to trace soft circles over the spot, causing her body to absolutely melt under his touch. She reached down gingerly to draw the cloth up and off her body in order to allow him full access.

As her blue shirt slipped over her head, she opened her eyes. Mike was staring at her intently, his eyes dark within the shadows of the dim room. His fingers roved delicately over her bare skin, his touch almost reverent in quality.

He shook his head as his eyes met hers. His voice was shaky.

"You are so beautiful."

Her whole body trembled in response.

Mike leaned in and pressed his lips lightly to the spot against El's collarbone, exploring the spot with fervor. She let out a quivering pant in reply. He moaned contentedly as he began to draw his lips down, tracing a line of pulsating heat toward her chest. His hand danced over her skin as he did so. His touch was soft, slow, and said so many things words couldn't.

It had been almost seven years since he had touched her in this way.

It had been almost seven years since she had been touched in this way at all.

There had never been anyone else.

A million sensations warred within El as the hours passed and they fully lost themselves in each other until dawn.

One sensation, though, fully overwhelmed the rest. It was unexpected, stunningly simple, and caused every single piece of her to sigh in startled relief.

Home.

Mike Wheeler's arms were home.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

My sweet baby El deserves the world.

I'd love to hear from you to know what you think, even if you read this in 2020 ;) Kudos and comments are always the favorite part of my day!

Also, just a heads up that you might not hear from me as quickly for the next chapter, it's probably a week and a half out. I'm an audiobook narrator, among many things, and I have a whole book to produce this week that I have been mega procrastinating on because I just wanna hang out with Mike and El all the time writing.

Speaking of, I have no idea if anyone would be into this but I'm testing the waters. Let me know in the comments if any of you have any interest in an audiobook version of this. If it's appealing to anyone I'd love to create it!

And finally, if you made it this far down! Here's your friendly reminder to subscribe to the Spotify playlist I created as a soundtrack. I exclusively listen to this when I write so the vibe is tied straight to the tone of this story. <https://open.spotify.com/user/laurawiese/playlist/538rIGfyj8dv6h7WZ0lj0d?si=8ny7AmAuTaGSzSTZNAvV1w>



## 12. Chapter 12

BEEP BEEP

"Noooooooo..." Mike moaned in groggy annoyance as he flopped a pillow over his head to hide from the offending noise.

El squirmed against him, her voice muffled in the crook of his shoulder. "Why does it keep doing that?"

BEEP BEEP

"Because someone hates me," he grumbled in return.

Which was probably the correct answer given who he feared it to be. There was only one person who'd consider paging him three times in 30 minutes, and he was *really* not looking forward to that phone call.

El's head jerked slightly.

BE—

"You're welcome," she mumbled.

"You're my hero," Mike chuckled as he removed the pillow from over his head and tightened his arm around her.

El nuzzled deeper into him. "If it goes off again I'm going to have to start charging for my services."

"Fair," Mike agreed as he dropped his cheek back against her forehead. "I'm sure we can work something out."

El's sleepy giggle reverberated against him as all memory of the pager disintegrated from his mind and he faded back into a half sleep.

The quiet didn't last for long. The pager continued, beeping at maddeningly consistent intervals. By the fifth round El had developed an almost cat-like reflex, shutting it off before it had even made it through a full beep.

The harsh noise seemed to signal reality. The pressing sensation of the real world as it attempted to break through the insulation that he and El had created throughout the night. He knew, with begrudging clarity, that they only had a few precious minutes left before they'd have to face it. There were plans to attend to. Issues to work out. Full government conspiracies to unravel.

He had waited years for this moment, though. The world could wait for a few minutes.

So instead, Mike focused on the only thing he wanted to think about. On El's soft even breath brushing against his neck as she laid in the crook of his shoulder. The warmth of her skin against his, tracing down the entire length of his body, no space existing between them. The softness of her curls where his fingers ran gentle absentminded circles. The light grip of her fingers, entwined within his at the small of her waist as he embraced her.

Two dueling sensations fought for Mike's attention as he relaxed into her. They were oddly dissonant, and each one was overwhelming in their own right.

On the one hand, he couldn't begin to describe how meaningful the past night had been for him, or how mind-bendingly *different* he felt when he awoke.

Something had shifted inside of him, the change brought on by her words as they'd danced in the dark. It had tilted off kilter and dislodged, effectively relieving him of a dark heavy ache he'd come to know as a normal sensation. An ache that wholly belonged to the boy he'd been.

Mike wished he could go back in time to share the news. He wished he could crawl through his old bedroom window right after she left. He wished he could gather the boy into his arms and tell him that it was going to be okay. He wished he could tell him that he knew how the chapter ended.

He wished he could tell him that a new chapter had begun. One that scared him. Excited him.

One that had caught him completely off guard.

Because last night Mike had felt something... new.

*And it was powerful.*

It had crept up slowly through the hours as they'd sat on the couch, and struck him like a bullet as she'd cracked a sarcastic joke and leaned against his arm while he laughed. The feeling was bizarre.

It had felt, in a surprising number of ways, like he was getting to know El for the very first time.

He'd noticed the ways in which she'd changed, in bits and pieces, through the last few days. Last night, though, as they'd shared stories in the dim light, she'd been on full display, making it impossible for him avoid the obvious.

It was true that much of her essence was still the same. Her kindness. Her unique ability to make him feel like the only people in the room. Those were still beautifully present in every moment. That alone had been enough to threaten to unravel him over the past days. However, gone was the quiet girl who'd been all shy smiles and questions. The girl who'd turned him into a human Encyclopedia. The girl who'd struggled to be anything but serious.

In her place was a woman who was unexpectedly witty and so much more playful. One who had the capacity to arrest him not just with glances and touches, but with words. He found himself entranced by how her lips moved when she spoke fast, and the crinkle at the edge of her eyes when she spoke in that new teasing tone that made him blush. Then there was the hard insistence now present in her kiss. The curves of her body against him beneath the sheets. The depths of her eyes, which seemed so much darker than he'd remembered, but were somehow all the more mesmerizing...if that was even possible.

Over the course of the night Mike Wheeler had completely fallen head over heels for El Hopper.

Not as a memory. In the here and now.

Mike broke out into a dumbstruck smile as the thought materialized.

He buried his face into El's hair as his stomach flipped violently. She hummed softly and nuzzled into his shoulder.

It felt like a new beginning.

He couldn't help but wonder if she felt the same.

As if on cue, his thoughts darted away from him, spinning anxious worry out of thin air. His chest instantly tightened in response. Mike had a strong imagination and great deductive reasoning skills. It was his strongest asset, but also his biggest curse. His mind always seemed hellbent on using these skills to kill his spirit in moments like this.

El stirred beside him.

What kind of guy did this El Hopper go for? Could he make the cut in the long run, after this crazy moment they were stuck in was over? He wasn't an idiot. He was aware that El had lived a very different life from him over the years. On the run with a bunch of punks. Flitting in and out of clubs, or so she'd said. El was gorgeous and captivating. There had to have been someone, or many someones, in her past.

Her fingers tightened around his at the small of her waist.

The potential type of guy was easy to visualize when he thought about her picture from the TV. Edgy guys. Rough guys. Guys that wore leather. Not nerdy hackers in sweaters like him.

Her other hand began to run light circles on his chest.

His stomach crashed painfully as he remembered the look on El's face when Kali brought up the deaths in the Philadelphia lab. She was shaking. Had El lost someone? A guy she loved? ...It would explain why she'd never tried to contact him. A queasy sensation materialized in his gut.

Her fingers glided up his chest and found their way to his neck.

Mike begged himself to stop. He tried to shut his brain up by replaying her words as they'd danced, as though they were a mantra.

By reminding himself how honest her eyes had been as she'd said them. By reliving, with a light blush, how utterly amazing it had been to be with her through the night. How *right* it had felt. She had to have felt that too, right? Maybe? Maybe not?

Her head shifted from its spot on his shoulder.

Why was he even focusing on this, he chided himself harshly. She was in the middle of a literal manhunt. They were days away from breaking into a government facility that, best case scenario, would lead to multiple deaths. This was not im-

"Mike..." She whispered.

Mike opened his eyes.

El was right there looking at him, startling him out of his thoughts, so close her nose almost brushed against his. Her fingers inched into his hair and sent shocks down his body as her lips brushed softly against his, sweet and full. The early morning kiss didn't bother him at all. He instinctively leaned deeper into her lips.

He'd completely forgotten how El's kiss could dampen any anxiety spiral in the world. How had he ever survived without it?

Her fingers dropped his at the small of her waist as she shifted and drew her other hand up to his face. Her thumb began gentle strokes against his jaw. His hands glided up the curve of her bare back in reply, luxuriating in the softness of her skin, which he hadn't been able to get enough of through the night. She emitted a small sound against his lips as she shivered at his touch, almost causing him to lose contr-

BEEP BEEP

"Goddammit," Mike growled, dropping his forehead against hers in defeat. "I'm so sorry."

El jerked imperceptibly.

B-



"Ignore it," she replied, her smile so tight against his lips he could almost taste it.

Something inside of him woke up fully to her presence as he gained confidence. He tightened his arms around her and rolled her on top of him, causing her to giggle in the most adorable way. Her elbows dropped on either side of his head and she pulled back from him, her hair falling in a veil around their faces, putting their small world in shadow. Mike opened his eyes to find her staring at him.

"Hi," she whispered, her eyes aglow. A soft smile quirked on her lips.

"Hi..."

Mike froze in her unexpected gaze, his heart beginning to hammer intensely as her fingers ran across his cheek so lightly he wasn't sure if they were there. Her eyes slowly roved across his cheeks, down to his lips, and finally up to his eyes. A bashful look took over her features as she bit her lip in an attempt to dampen a smile.

"You got so handsome, Mike," El mused. Her voice airy, earnest and almost...awestruck.

"I did?" Mike breathed, a blush instantly heating up his face as his chest purred at her words.

She nodded shyly as she let out a soft, "Mmhmm". "I... I like *this*," she said as her eyes moved to focus on the location where her fingers ran through the scruff at his jaw. "How long have you had a beard?"

At that, Mike could only laugh. "Total accident. Since like... a week ago?"

"What?" she asked quizzically.

"No, I mean it. I... um... I usually keep it shaved, or at least not like a full beard like... whatever this is. Everything's been crazy this week, though. Obviously," he shrugged awkwardly. "I kind of just let it go. I didn't have time to deal with it. So yeah, accident."

"Oh," she replied, a soft smile still gracing her lips as her fingers continued to stroke his cheek, threatening to unravel his composure

as he had nowhere to look but her twinkling eyes. "Happy accident, then."

"Yeah..." he breathed as he internally swore to never shave his face clean ever again. "Happy accident."

El didn't look away. Her eyes squinted as she smiled in full. Her hand shifted up to the crook of his neck as she lowered her lips closer, so so slo-

BEEP BEEP

El laughed the second her lips met his. It was infectious. Mike rolled his eyes, cursing the universe as his fingers slipped into her hair and he kissed her giggling mouth.

BEEP BEEP

"You have to check that thing," she sighed as she slid off of him and rolled her eyes.

"Please don't make me," he whined as he followed her in an attempt to save the moment. El shook head, clearly insinuating she was done using her powers.

BEEP BEEP

Mike groaned as he crawled out of the bed to look for his pants, which had been discarded *somewhere* throughout the night. He located them quickly and fished the beeper out of his pocket.

He didn't look at the numbers on the screen as he flipped the off switch instead of the silencer. He didn't need to look. Guilt was already flooding him fully, without having to look, as he thought about the girl on the other side of the call.

He placed the pager on the bedside table and crawled back into the bed.

"Everything okay?" El asked, a look of slight apprehension tensing her features.

"Yeah, everything's fine," he said softly. He was desperate to restore the mood. He slid his arm beneath her neck, but stopped as his finger caught against a thread of cold metal in her hair.

"Hold still," he said as his other hand joined his first, "I think your necklace is stuck in your hair."

"Oh!" El's hands shot up into her hair and batted his away. "I'll do it," she replied quickly, something odd in her eyes.

At once, El crawled out of the bed, catching Mike completely off guard. He cursed inwardly as his mind conjured all of the reasons that would have prompted her to leave.

Her hand clutched her hair as she made her way through the room. "We should probably get up, anyway. As much as I'd like to, I think there's too much going on for me to lose a whole day in bed."

Mike didn't reply. His mind had stopped with a screeching halt, completely forgetting his disappointment that she'd left the bed.

At no time in his life had he ever seen El Hopper like this.

When they'd been young, their intimate interactions had occurred beneath clothing, in order to avoid the potential trauma of getting caught by Holly, his mom, or worst of all, Hopper. The two times they had been completely nude with each other? Those had occurred in the middle of the night, in moments punctuated with whispers. Hidden in the cover of darkness between the moments when El would slip in and out of his bedroom window.

Even if he had gotten a better look at her back then, though, he was certain she had never looked like *this* at sixteen...

El's body looked like an oil painting in the morning light. Her milky white skin accentuated the angles, shadows and curves of her lithe frame. Her chestnut hair fell in a cascade down to the small of her back.

The woman Mike had just spent the night with was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

El cut off his view and brought his mind back to Earth as she slipped a thick grey sweater over her body, landing at the top of her thighs. Mike's eyes suddenly widened for a completely different reason.

"Is that my sweater?!" he asked incredulously.

El turned around quickly, her hands frozen in her hair. A blush rose to her cheeks as though she'd been caught red handed.

"Maybe..." she said coyly.

"I looked for that sweater for years!" Mike exclaimed as he sat up in the bed, "It was my favorite one!"

"Well...sorry," El replied as she turned away and worked the knot of metal out of her hair. Her tone was soft when she turned back, spying him sheepishly as she slipped her necklace beneath the knitted top, a guilty smile upon her lips. "It was my favorite, too."

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The sun was already leaving the sky, casting Mike's drab apartment in shadow as El yawned and leaned against the desk. They had slept late, though El wasn't sure if she'd gotten any sleep at all. She felt herself blush at the thought.

Kali had blessedly decided not to give her shit about it. Not yet, at least.

"Judging by the work schedules, it looks like the 27th is the least populated shift when Brenner is listed on the schedule," Mike said in a hushed whisper, working hard to obscure their conversation from Sev, who was playing a video game on the other side of the room.

El felt a growing sense of dread as they reached the main topic of their planning for the day. The last few days had been a beautiful holiday from the reality of what they were about to embark on, but it all came back as the name "M. Brenner" stared back at her from the screen.

Mike's finger obscured his name as he pointed at the screen. "If you get in there at shift change we could maybe lessen the number of people caught in the raid. Like, people might leave early or show up

late. I can trip the security system from here to lock the place down. That way no one can get in or out once you're inside."

Kali nodded at his right, "I like it. Can I see the map again?"

With a few clicks of his mouse, Mike brought up the floor plan of the building. The address of the facility they'd been searching for for weeks was clearly marked on the top left, next to a large bold "CLASSIFIED".

El felt a finger tap her shoulder. She leaned back to find Kali's wide eyes staring at her behind Mike's back. Kali shook her head in disbelief and gave her a thumbs up as she pointed at the screen.

El mirrored her look in full. The materials Mike had found were amazing. The last time she and Kali had broken into a lab, they'd had no way to plan at all. It made El feel sick again just thinking about it, but she'd had no idea it was possible to get this amount of detail on a classified location.

She'd always known it, but it absolutely floored her in the moment. Mike was a genius. He almost made this feel... easy.

"If you take the tactic of slipping in at shift change this is the door you're going to want to use," Mike continued, pointing the pencil he'd been chewing on to an access point off of a back alley. "I can't be sure, but I think this is the main entry for employees. The largest security room is right next to it."

El and Kali studied the map in detail as the conversation faded off. She didn't want to, but she worked to populate her thoughts with what it would look like inside. It wasn't hard to imagine. If the Philadelphia lab had taught her anything it was that each of these labs was alike. Philadelphia had been almost a carbon copy of Hawkins in esthetic. A dim tile and linoleum labyrinth that smelled of nauseating antiseptics.

El's throat went tight as she prepared to ask the question that would make everything real. Her voice was raspy as she spoke.

"Where do you think we'll find him?"

She didn't think about the man anymore than she had to. His presence caused a cascade of dread within her every time he slipped into her thoughts. It was necessary to think about him now, though. If they were going to succeed at this, she was going to see his face. In full. In reality. Directly in front of her.

Her left hand absentmindedly crawled up and grasped the hard circle of metal beneath her sweater as the dark sensation washed over her. Throughout the years, it had become a reflex. The ring had always been a source of strength. The first place her hands went when she needed to feel grounded, but felt anything but.

Her fingers turned the ring beneath the sweater, not daring to bring it to the light. Nervousness washed over her as she remembered that he had been *so close* to seeing it around her neck that morning. With his weird little beeping phone number machine going off over and over again with what she could only guess was his ex-girlfriend, it just felt too soon to admit *how very much* El had never been able to move on. It felt like a big admission as the beeper reminded her over and over again that it hadn't been the same for Mike.

Her change in mood must have been obvious, because at that moment she felt Mike's fingers tentatively brush her right hand under the desk. She felt a rush of calm push through her veins as her fingers willingly intertwined with his.

She squeezed his hand in reply.

"You'd know more about this than me," Mike said as he pointed at the screen. "This large space near the center on the sub level is labeled 'Experiment Lab'. Would that be where most of the work happens? Would he spend most of his time there?"

His thumb began to run softly across the top of her hand. Her left hand gripped more firmly onto the ring.

"It depends," Kali interjected, her voice containing none of the fear El felt.

Kali's motivations had always been so different than El's, and it showed more clearly in this moment than in any other. Kali seemed

to be driven by a pure sense of vendetta. Her life had always revolved around making everyone pay.

For El, the last years had simply been a means to an end. The only way for her to create a safe and free future.

"I bet his office is this one." Kali pointed to a small room directly off of the Experiment Lab. "And I bet these are the Project's holding areas." Her finger traced down the next hallway off the right of the Experiment Lab. Four doors side by side, stopping at a dead end.

"Mike, do you think you can find more about the Projects?" Kali asked, her voice purely business. "We've got the time. What day is it?"

"It's the 23rd," Mike replied.

"Okay, so four days," Kali nodded. "Great. Find me more information on the Projects and we can continue to study the map. This is enough for today."

El breathed a sigh of relief at her sister's decision.

"Oh, Mike?" Kali added, her voice changing to something soft. El looked in surprise at her change in tone.

"Yeah?"

"You mentioned fakes yesterday..." she continued, her eyes alight. "What would that entail?"

El's face broke out into a massive smile for her sister.

It was the one thing Kali had always wanted.

El had a birth certificate and an ID. Something that allowed her, if she needed, to move through the world. Though she never dared use it. Kali, however, had never had any documentation in her entire 27 years save for one shitty fake ID that did nothing more than grant her access to alcohol.

El and Kali had spent years in seclusion with nothing to do but pass the time, so they'd talked. They'd dreamed. They'd thought of all of

the thousands of things they'd do if they could only escape their circumstances. For Kali, it was a singular dream. To go to Europe. To leave behind this 'hell hole of a country that had stolen her life.' So, a passport in the same week that they took out Brenner? It made El's heart burst with happiness.

"Yeah, we can go down there tomorrow and check it out. His operation is pretty expansive. I bet we can work something out." Mike replied as he worked to close out the documents they'd been combing through.

"Awesome," Kali said as she stood up. "Thanks, Mike. Jane?"

"Yes?" she replied, looking back at her sister.

Kali sighed, an apologetic look on her face. "You have to talk to Sev. What happened might be important when we go into the lab."

El cringed, her voice growly as she responded. "I'll do it after dinner, okay?"

Kali nodded and rubbed El's shoulder in thank you as she turned to the small girl. Sev was at the edge of the bed, eyes bulging as she crushed Super Mario Kart in a way that made El certain she was using her powers to do so.

"Sev," Kali called, "I think there's one box of Mac and Cheese left. Did you like that last time?"

"You okay?" Mike asked softly, leaning in closer to El as her sisters spoke in the background. His hand hadn't left hers. He tightened his grip as he spoke. She looked up and connected with his worried eyes.

She nodded and smiled softly. "I'm fine. Thank you for all of this."

"Anytime," he replied as he turned back to the computer.

She watched the screen as he worked, moving through screens and clicking through a language she couldn't read at all. "This is all amazing. It's like magic."

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Mike smile in that secret way he



only did when he didn't think she was watching. A precious look that hadn't changed at all since he was twelve. "Thanks, El."

El watched in silence for a few more minutes as Mike worked beside her. She tried to avoid thinking about what she had to do next.

El felt desperately guilty about it, but she'd been avoiding Sev since their 'interaction' the night before last. In classic El fashion, she had tried to tuck it into the black box in the corner of her mind. A place where thought didn't go.

Kali was right, though, it was best for her to know exactly how she'd done it. How she'd... frozen her, she thought with a dark shiver.

"Mike?" El asked quietly as she rubbed her thumb over his. "Will you help me talk to Sev?"

"Sure," he replied casually, as though she'd only asked to borrow his pen.

"She likes you so much and I'm pretty sure she hates me at this point".

"That's not true. Sev likes you. She felt terrible the other night. She's just a kid, there's no reason to be scared of her."

El laughed darkly, "Yeah, just a kid who is the only person I've met who might actually be able to kill me."

"But she wouldn't," Mike replied earnestly as he turned to look at her, his voice taking on a serious tone. "You saved that girl. She won't forget that."

El let Mike's words sink in. "Good point," she replied gratefully.

"Listen," he said, his eyes emanating a confident comfort. "We'll just go over there and play video games with her. You'll let her win so she feels cool and then we'll just talk."

"Okay," El replied with a nervous smile.

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"Cheater." Sev barked as she tossed down the controller and pulled her arms into a pout.

"You were supposed to let her win..." Mike whispered teasingly, their bodies leaned against the concrete wall behind the bed as El's Princess Peach shot through the Finish Line in first place.

El shrugged and whispered back against his ear with a guilty laugh, "I wanted to see if I could overpower her for control of the machine. I totally did it."

"I noticed," Mike said as he rolled his eyes and pointed to his nose.

"Oh really?" she asked in surprise, touching her nose to feel the slightest bit of blood. Her eyes shined with mirth as she looked back and wiped her nose, "Well, I'm feeling better." She bit back a smile. "I'll let her win next time."

"Want to go another round?" El asked Sev.

Mike watched Sev send El a dark look. "Cheater," she murmured.

"We both cheated!" El replied with an accusing laugh. "You cheated first!"

The guilty look that materialized on Sev's face was all El and Mike needed to break into a loud laugh.

"Okay. Again." Sev said in mixed tone of annoyance and amusement.

El nodded and the girls began to cycle through the screens to start the next game.

Night had long since descended on the room, and it crossed Mike's mind that in a few hours it would be Christmas Eve. It was crazy. All sense of the holiday season had dropped from his mind the second he saw her on that train car a week ago. But as he sat on the bed with El and Sev, the room punctuated with video game noises, cheers and grunts, he couldn't help but feel a bizarre sensation that their weird little group was exactly how he'd wanted to spend Christmas.

The thought was followed by a fresh wave of guilt. This wasn't how

he'd promised to spend Christmas. His pager burned a hole in his pocket as his eyes fell on Marissa's sweater in the far corner of his room.

He'd easily been able to block out his feelings for the first few days due to El's presence. Nothing was more overwhelming than her return into his life. But as his beeper had gone off endlessly through the morning, he realized couldn't keep his guilt at bay anymore.

It's not that he regretted his decision. The decision itself was obvious. Honestly, he could see the end right around the corner even if El hadn't returned. At the same time, though, he felt awful for how it played out. She'd deserved so much better than a wordless vacant stare that didn't end until she stormed out.

Before he knew it his pager was in his hand and he had turned it on.

His chest tightened as he saw exactly what he'd expected. Scrolling through the notifications, he was greeted with the same ten digits over and over again. The number that was vaguely familiar, probably since he'd seen it on his pager when she'd paged him from her family's over Thanksgiving. He scrolled through number by number, until he dead ended at a number that wasn't like any of the rest.

"Will!" he exclaimed, jumping up from the bed.

"What?" El asked, looking away from the screen long enough for her kart to crash into a barricade, making Sev laugh in triumph.

"Will paged me," Mike replied, almost giddy. "I'm gonna call him back. It's not too late yet. Do you... do you want to listen in?"

"YES." El said, her eyes wide and suddenly full of emotion as she dropped the controller and crawled off of the bed.

"I win," Sev said to herself as El abandoned the game, content with herself as she continued to crush the track.

El was directly behind him, almost stepping on his heels as she followed him into the kitchen. Mike laughed as she hopped up onto the kitchen counter by the phone.

"Excited?" he teased as he picked up the receiver and began to dial the number he'd known by heart since he was five years old. El nodded emphatically but didn't speak. Mike's heart expanded in response to the look on her face. He slipped his arm around her shoulder as he placed the receiver between their faces.

The phone gave two long rings before a kind "Hello?" echoed from the other end. El jumped, her hand flying against her mouth as she fisted Mike's shirt into her other hand.

"Hey, Cleric!" Mike replied, his arm tightening around El.

"PALADIN!" Will's voice echoed cheerily all the way from Hawkins.

"It's Mike?! Hiiii Mikeeeeyyyy!" a voice Mike instantly recognized as Dustin echoed in the background.

"Dustin just told me that you're not going home for Christmas," Will started -

"- He's at Christmas with the El Clone," Dustin's called in the background. Mike winced dangerously as he felt El's hand unfist against his shirt.

"Wow Dustin. That is really rude," Will said, his voice muffled as though he'd covered the receiver.

"Yeah, you're right. Sorry, Mike! I'm drunk!" Dustin called.

"Anyway, ignore him," Will continued. "Where are you?"

"I'm still in New York, actually," Mike replied as he felt himself cringe. He pushed out the next words despite how much he didn't want to say them with El's face pushed up against his. "I'm... not going to my girlfriend's for Christmas. That's... not really a thing anymore."

"Something happen?" Will asked in his trademark caring tone.

Mike frowned. '*You have no idea*' his mind screamed. He would have given anything to tell Will the whole story. Will would have completely understood.

Instead, Mike just grumbled, "You can say that..."

"Wait, are you spending Christmas by yourself in New York, then?" Will asked, his voice filled with something akin to motherly worry.

Dustin's voice burst up again in the background. "Alone? Did he break up with the El Clo- Sorry! The girl? Fuck, what was her name? I spent two days with her. Damn, she was forgettable. Sorry, Mike! Ignore me if you didn't break up with her! I'm an asshole!"

El's hand had fallen completely away from his shirt. He could feel her shortened breaths through her shoulders. Mike cursed inwardly. This was not going at all how he'd pictured it.

"Dustin!" Will barked with a warning.

"Anyway," Mike replied quickly in an attempt to change the subject. "I saw you paged me. It's good to hear from you, man! It's been like a month."

"Um..." Will replied in confusion. "I... I mean I'm super happy to hear from you... but I didn't page you..."

A new voice, gruffer than any of his friends, sounded off in the background.

"Are you talking to Wheeler?"

Mike felt El inhale sharply. Her shoulders tensed dramatically against his draped arm.

"Hopper!" Dustin cried in the background. "Have a beer with me!"

"Will, give me the phone. I need to talk to him." Hopper's tone was serious as his voice got progressively more clear.

Mike's stomach dropped. Something he'd been missing the entire day, something blatantly obvious, smashed into the pit of his stomach.

"Um... okay? Mike, Hop wants to talk to you," Will said, the pitch of his voice rising with worry.

"Okay..." Mike replied shakily, "Well, bye Will."

Will didn't reply as Hopper's voice became fully clear through the receiver. "Guys, get out of here. I need to talk to Mike privately."

"Oooh, Mike's in trouble!" Dustin drunkenly teased as his voice faded.

"Jesus, kid," Hopper growled. "I've been trying to get ahold of you since 9am. You don't answer that beep thing anymore?"

El gasped. Mike could feel her shaking.

"You alone?" Hopper asked suddenly, not knowing it was his daughter's frenzied breath that had interrupted the call.

"Uh... yeah...Totally alone." Mike lied.

"Good," Hopper barked. "Because we need to talk. Call me back. And this time call me back *the right way*."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Buckle up, kiddos.

Comments and Kudos make my fingers type faster!

Spotify playlist, join it! It's the music that magically makes my fingers generate these chapters. <https://open.spotify.com/user/laurawiese/playlist/538rIGfyj8dv6h7WZ0lj0d?si=rxHwflyPRtWUVj91pT9WNw>

Thank you for reading!! Next chapter will likely be up Friday :)

- L -

## 13. Chapter 13

### *March 1989*

Mike parked his car off the gravel road, being careful not to get his tires stuck in the mud. The morning air was crisp, but it felt almost balmy at the end of the long winter. He pocketed his keys and a crisply folded piece of white paper, got out and slammed the door. He shoved his fists into the pockets of his puffy blue and grey vest as he began the walk he could now do in his sleep. The ground was mucky and spotted with small puddles from the recent thaw.

He let sense memory guide him as he brought his attention to better things. A small smile lit up his face. He felt almost...happy? Not quite. Accomplished. A little bit in control for the first time in as long as he could remember.

Gunshots echoed through the trees in a rhythmic pattern as the cabin came into view. He lifted his foot high and instantly cursed as he remembered for the one hundredth time that the trip wire was long gone. He took the long way around the cabin, cutting around the left, so as to avoid the window that always caused his chest to tighten.

The stumps and cans came into view first. He slowed his stroll and watched as the cans methodically disappeared to the ground, each punctuated by a gun shot.

"I'm here!" Mike called once the final can disappeared.

"You're late, Wheeler," Hopper called back gruffly. He heard the large man's footsteps squish against the wet ground as Mike made his way around the back corner of the house to meet him.

Hopper appeared the same as he did every Saturday morning. A blue flannel peeking out from his unzipped police coat, hair slightly mussed. He slipped his gun into his belt as he took a seat in one of two orange braided lawn chairs against the back of the cabin wall. Mike took the other chair and reached for the thermos of coffee on the small table between them.

"New cups?" Mike asked as he picked up a "Worlds Best Grandpa" mug and held it up inquisitively.

Hopper laughed, "Joyce came out here over the week to help me pack up the place. She found that in the crawl space. God knows I couldn't get down there. But it's here, so might as well use it."

Mike shrugged as he poured coffee into the mug. "I've got a good reason to be late, by the way." Mike finally replied, quirking a smile in Hopper's direction as he sipped the coffee and spied the bullet riddled stumps 50 feet away. "I got the tap off of everyone's phones."

"Shit kid." Hopper almost choking on his coffee. "You figured it out?"

"Yeah, I finally cracked it. Took me all night so I'm kinda fried but... I did it," Mike rubbed his eyes to wake himself up. "Thank god Steve was the one on duty. If Powell had come into the station overnight I wouldn't have gotten it done. He would have kicked me out, the asshole."

Hopper slapped Mike on the back heartily. "Well, if that's what made you late I wouldn't have minded if you'd been three days late. Knew you could do it, kid. You're too smart for your own good."

"Thanks, Hop," Mike replied in surprise, feeling an odd sense of pride at Hopper's reaction. Hopper pulled his hand back and used it to pick up his own coffee cup. They sat in silence for a moment as Mike's hand fidgeted against a sheet of paper in his pocket. "There's uh... there's something else."

"More good news? We don't get a lot of that around here, I don't know if I can handle more," Hopper joked gruffly.

Mike laughed as he pulled the sheet of paper out of his pocket, surprised to find his hands shaking as he did so. The paper felt heavy in his hands, as though its meaning gave it physical weight. He hesitantly handed the paper to Hopper. Hopper quizzically looked at the paper before he opened the trifold sheet and began to read. He was only one sentence in before he looked up wide eyed at the young man beside him. Mike was stunned when the man's face broke out into a rare smile.



"Well, I'll be damned, Wheeler..." he said with a nod as he looked back down at the paper and perused the rest of the message. "Congratulations."

Mike drowned his mouth in coffee so he didn't have to reply. The words on the paper elicited so many conflicting emotions in him he couldn't quite process them.

"This is... they don't take many people right?" Hopper mumbled as he read.

"No, they don't," Mike replied, deciding to take pleasure in his accomplishment for the moment. "MIT only has like a 10% acceptance rate."

Hopper whistled in reply as he folded the paper and handed it back to Mike. "Can't tell you how happy I am for you, kid. You deserve it."

Mike smiled shyly, avoiding the man's eyes as he pocketed the acceptance letter. He could feel Hopper's eyes on him.

"What is it?" Hopper finally asked after a moment, his voice cutting straight through any bullshit Mike had thought of saying.

Mike sighed. "Just feels...weird... to think about leaving." His hand nervously played with the paper in his pocket as he let the admission leave his lips.

Hopper replied with a sigh of his own as he rubbed his brow. "You can't stay here forever waiting for her, kid. I can. And I will. But you can't."

"I know," Mike said plainly, surprised by Hopper's direct words.

They didn't talk about her much anymore.

That wasn't true.

They talked about her all of the time. In a way, she was all they ever talked about. Not directly, though. Never directly. They talked about everything surrounding her. What they were doing to help her. Progress on her whereabouts. But talking about her like this? That

they avoided. The pain was too real, and neither of them felt prepared to address it head on.

The rare moment was here though, and a part of him just *needed* to feel it. "I just...thought she'd be back by now. You know?" He dared look at Hopper when he said it.

Hopper didn't meet his eyes. He stared out over the trees as he leaned back in the creaking lawn chair. "You and me both. She might still. Who knows." Hopper blinked quickly a few times before looking back at Mike. "I'm gonna be here. Okay? But you? You have a life to live. So, you're gonna go. You're gonna go to your fancy school and fill up that brain of yours with all of that weird tech mumbo jumbo that's giving you some creepy superpower, and well, it'll help her," Hopper's voice faded off for a second before he added, "Just because you're leaving Hawkins doesn't mean you're giving up on her."

Mike felt socked in the gut by Hopper's last words. He couldn't deny that he felt exactly the opposite. He didn't taste the coffee as he took a sip.

Silence descended upon them once more as birdsong began to wake up more fully around them from the thick splay of trees. Mike wasn't sure how long he'd been lost in thought before Hopper shuffled beside him. A gun appeared in the man's hand, visible between them from the corner of Mike's eye.

"Wanna take it out on the cans?" Hopper asked gruffly.

Mike sighed out the breath he'd been holding as he nodded curtly and took the gun. The bit of control he'd felt earlier in the morning returned to his body as he felt the small deadly machine curved into the palm of his hand. He stood up and grabbed the waste basket full of cans that had been laying in wait against the back of the cabin and ambled across the small field to the set of stumps. Mike methodically set up the cans one by one, before walking his regular straight line back to the cabin.

The bullets laid on the small table between the lawn chairs. Mike returned, took a seat, and began to load the gun. His mind wandered as he did so, visions flitting through of his shaky hands doing it for

the first time two summers back, so different from the calculated precision he had now. He pulled himself back to the now as he stood.

"Remember your alignment!" Hopper called from his chair as Mike crossed to his regular spot.

"When was the last time I forgot my alignment?" Mike barked back in annoyance as he took his stance.

"Don't give me shit, Wheeler. You forgot last week." Hopper called back brusquely.

Mike laughed as he shook his black hair out of his eyes and took off the safety. The world around him faded at the edges as he focused on the cherry red Coke can on the far left.

He needed this right now.

He cocked the handgun, set up his aim, and pulled the trigger.

The can was gone a split second later.

He repeated.

The second can was gone.

The third. Gone.

The fourth. Gone.

The fifth. Gone.

The sixth. Gone.

The seventh. Gone.

*Steady...*

The eighth.

GONE.

"Holy shit!" Mike cried, his voice loud enough to echo through the

trees as his body released a shockwave of energy. His ears rang as adrenalin whipped intensely through his veins. Mike spun around and gaped at Hopper, his face beaming like a kid on Christmas.

"Damn!" the man said, clearly impressed, as he walked to meet Mike where he stood.

Mike looked back to the stumps to make sure all of the cans were indeed gone and he hadn't made the whole thing up. He spun back at Hopper, wide eyed, their eyes meeting evenly at the same height.

Hopper laughed at Mike's expression. He draped his arm around Mike's shoulders and squeezed him quickly as he spoke. "Yeah, I wouldn't believe it either if I hadn't seen it," he joked sarcastically. He took the gun from Mike's hand, his words continuing as he loaded another set of rounds. "You did good, kid. It's a big day. Just think, when you first started it took you three months to hit your first can. Could only get better from there."

Mike laughed darkly between his quick shallow breaths, "Thanks for the encouragement, Hopper."

"It *was* encouragement, kid. Just my own special brand," Hopper replied as he closed the barrel with the butt of his hand and handed the gun back to Mike. "Go set up another line. See if you can repeat that."

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It had become almost easy after so many years away. To rationalize the decisions she'd made. To move forward with her plan. She had long since accepted the consequences of the path she had been dealt.

But in this moment, with Mike's arm heavy around her shoulder and a voice from the past calling into her ear in the present, her whole world turned sideways and everything she had done became a question once again.

The smashing sensation that rocked through her as he echoed through the phone was instant and visceral. It started deep within her gut like a punch, causing her to gasp, and ruptured through her heart with the intensity of a bomb, flooding her with a sensation she did

not deserve to feel.

Longing.

Followed directly by a shame that threatened to swallow her whole.

Too much. There was too much escaping at once. She began to shake from its force.

Tears crashed against the back of her eyes, but they did not fall. Her muscles were too shocked to go through with the process.

His memory had been tucked away in a black box, deep in the recesses of her heart where feeling couldn't easily reach. He'd been there since the night she'd stood over him as he slept, backpack limp in her hand, tears crusted at the edges of her eyes. Even in his sleep he hadn't looked peaceful. She had felt certain that in his dreams he knew what she was about to do. Every part of her had ached to wake him up and say goodbye, but it was expressly not an option. If she woke him she would never get to leave. She had to leave.

She had no choice but to sew him up against the back of her heart.

She had tracked him only twice. Two days later, and two months later. It hurt too much to see his pain for her to ever do it again.

After that, she worked to keep him out of her thoughts, a skill she was quiet adept at achieving. From then on, he only fully surfaced in her dreams. When he appeared it was always in the best way. His wry little jokes and playful looks would bounce around the edges of her subconsciousness, coupled with the rare smiles that had become more common the longer they'd been together. His imposing figure, which never made her feel anything but safe, looming in the corner of her mind.

Every time she awoke with stark shockwaves of guilt racing through her, her chest aching for the way things had been. Shame would echo through her mind as it settled on a rare instance of truth:

He never deserved what she had done to him.

On those mornings she felt utterly helpless. Empty. Each time she

worked to tuck the emotions away once again. Back in the box. Out of the light. As it had been for years.

She didn't know if she could listen to any more.

*"Good. Because we need to talk. Call me back. And this time, call me back the right way."*

A click. And then dial tone.

Yet her heart cried out for more as his voice disappeared.

El sat frozen on the cold metal kitchen counter, words unable to form in her mind as her body worked to simply breathe through the surfacing pain.

"El?" Mike whispered. Somewhere in the back of her mind she had registered him leaving her side, but she was unsure of how long he'd been back. His voice was soft yet insistent as his hand rubbed against her arm. She looked up slowly and swallowed hard when she saw nervousness in his eyes.

"I have to call him back." His voice was clear, focused and adamant. "Do you want to come with me?"

El didn't have the capacity to question what was going on. She slipped off the counter and felt Mike's hand grab hers as he led her out of the kitchen, out of the apartment, and toward the second apartment.

Mike stopped suddenly in the open doorway of the second apartment, causing El to bump into his back. She winced as her head hit against something hard inside of a black backpack he was now wearing.

Mike didn't seem to notice. "Kali's asleep in here. Grab your coat, we're going to the roof. ...Privacy," he said as he turned around abruptly and left her in the doorway so he could do the same in his own apartment.

She watched him go in surprise, the throbbing in her forehead from the bump enough to bring her to her senses. Curiosity began to mix into her other emotions as she quickly slipped on her coat, followed

by her fingerless gloves, and darted back out into the hallway.

Mike waiting for her, zipped into his puffy black coat, backpack in hand. His face was serious as he bounced on the balls of his feet. Mike speak for *'hurry up.'*

"Ready?" he asked.

"...Yes?" El said slowly.

Words finally began to work through her body and into her mind. Questions began to form into phrases. Once they started they smashed against the inside of her skull by the dozens, but Mike just took off down the hallway toward the roof access staircase, giving her no chance to interrogate.

"What's going on?" she finally squeaked out as they entered the stairwell.

"I don't know," Mike said, his voice surprisingly curt. They reached the top landing.

Mike attempted to open the door to the roof but instantly gave up. "This is good enough," he muttered to himself as he dropped the bag on the step by his feet and took a seat on the stairs. He wasted no time as he unzipped the backpack and began to rummage around. She watched him closely, her eyes catching a glimpse of a sweater, a glint of black metal, and a manila envelope before he pulled out what looked like a half sized Supercomm and zipped up the bag. He pulled his beeper from his jeans pocket and punched numbers from the screen into the number buttons on the machine in his hand. When he was done, finger hovering over a red button, he looked up and motioned for her to join him on the stairs.

"Is that a... cellular phone?" she asked as she sat beside him.

Mike nodded and held his finger to his lips in a request for silence as he pushed the red button. After one single ring her Dad's voice entered her ears once more. What followed only made the ache in her chest deepen and her questions triplicate.

"Did you forget, Wheeler?" the man growled. "I need you to call me

when I buzz."

"You haven't used this number in over a year," Mike barked back defensively. "I forgot the number."

Hopper scoffed. "You're in New York right now?"

"Yeah, I am..." Mike replied, a hint of question in his voice.

"Then," he sighed audibly on the other side. She could vividly envision him pinching the bridge of his nose. "You don't by chance know anything about why I got a fax from the NYPD at the station this morning with my daughter's face on it? In my national bulletin pile. Something about her kidnapping a 'cancer patient'?"

*Fuck.*

El cringed and worked very hard not to groan audibly.

Mike seemed to do the same.

"Um..." Mike murmured.

El looked up and caught his eye as she shook her head frantically and mouthed "No." Mike stared at her for a moment, clearly conflicted.

"It's gotta be on tv there. You seen the news?" he added through the line.

She pleaded silently. He finally nodded in understanding, but his brow was furrowed.

"Shit," Mike feigned recognition as he stared at her with a hint of frustration. "I've seen it in passing but... you're sure it's her?"

El mouthed a large silent *'thank you'*.

Mike smiled wryly back at her.

"I get it," her Dad's voice continued on the other side of the call, pulling back her attention. "It is hard to tell. She's disguised pretty well but... I'd recognize my daughter's face no matter how many



pounds of makeup... or how many years its been."

A intense sensation waved through her chest at his words. She leaned in closer to the phone.

"Plus, I'd know a Brenner kid anywhere," he continued. "Short story is she's in some kind of danger, kid."

"Shit," Mike said.

"Yeah," Hopper sighed. "I'm doing what I can, but it's not much... You been looking into her files lately?"

"Um...Not for a few days..." Mike lied again, his face obviously pained. "Everything's been clean for a while."

"Well, it sure as hell isn't clean now," Hopper barked, not at Mike but rather at the situation. "She needs your help. If you can do any cleanup on this, do it."

"Is that... it?"

"What do you mean 'is that it'? She's in the middle of an active man hunt, kid."

"No... I mean," Mike struggled to recover. "You've just seen the kidnapping notice. You haven't noticed anything else weird?"

"No, I just got the one-page bulletin this morning. Who the fuck knows what the real story is but..." she could hear worry beginning to lace his words, slowly creeping through as it always had. "Just do your thing and watch out for her. Okay? Who knows, she might be in New York if anything about the notice is correct."

"That's a crazy thought." Mike replied, his voice completely believable as his dark eyes bore directly into hers from four inches away.

"You'll let me know if you hear from her?" he added, a sense of desperation now clearly playing into his tone. El swallowed hard against her remounting emotions. "She might be in your city."

This time Mike fully cringed before he lied through his teeth. "As always, I'll tell you if she contacts me."

"Oh, and one more thing," he added. "Can you check the taps? This whole thing has me jumpy. I don't like it."

"Yeah, I'm on it right now. They were clear a few days ago."

"Thanks," His voice trailed off for a second. El leaned in closer, her heartbeat racing as she realized he was about to leave. Finally, he spoke again. "Been a while. You doing good? New York treating you better than it was originally?"

"Yeah," Mike replied. "I'm a little freaked out by what you told me, but I'm good. It's alright here. You?"

"Was doing okay til I woke up to this," he said gruffly. "Alright, I gotta go. I'm freezing my ass off out here. I hate this fucking phone you got me. Phones are supposed to be inside. In the warmth. By a comfy chair."

"...Then put a comfy chair out in the shed and use one of the space heaters. Problem solved." Mike quipped back as he rolled his eyes.

"Don't be a smartass," Hopper replied, a tired joke in his voice. "Let me know what you find."

"I'll dig into it right now."

"Merry Christmas, kid."

"Thanks," Mike said. "You too, Hop."

The line went dead before Mike pushed one final button and slid the antenna back into the cellular phone. He unzipped the bag just enough to slip the phone in as he let out a deep exhale.

Confusion rushed against the back of her skull like a car crash as the moment descended into silence. Nothing about what she just experienced made sense. Nothing about her emotions. Nothing about their words. Nothing about the way they'd been talking. One million threads with no obvious way to stitch them together.

It was too much.

"That was -" Mike started as he ran his fingers through his hair.

"- I need some air," she said quickly as she stood up and heaved the door open.

Snow was softly falling from the sky as she stepped out onto the roof, in big thick flakes. So much like the night her dad had found her, yet so different when framed by the lights of the city. She trudged out into the cold and brought it deeply into her lungs as she walked across the roof.

Mike's footsteps echoed quickly behind her before he finally met her stride as they reached the edge of the roof overlooking the Hudson River. El came to the metal casing of a building fan about fifteen feet from the edge and casually pushed the snow off with her mind.

"What was all that?" she asked abruptly, her emotions betraying her as her voice shook. She took a seat on the cold metal. "I feel like I'm missing something,"

"Well, yeah. You probably did," Mike said darkly as he dropped himself beside her on the steel. She looked at him, surprised by his tone. He gazed out over the river, his expression tight.

"I hate lying," he finally said on a huge exhale as he turned to her, his eyes burning with the next words before he spoke them. "I think we should tell your dad you're here."

El gaped at him.

"No." It shot from her mouth like a reflex.

Mike rolled his eyes dramatically as his shoulders fell. "Explain to me why that isn't an option." His tone was stubborn as he challenged her conviction with his eyes. It was a maddening side of him she hadn't seen in years. It made her own frustration rise.

"It's not safe."

"No shit it's not safe," he barked back suddenly, his tone escalating. "I

don't care about that. Do you think he'll care about that? He's never cared about that."

The way he was looking at her... hurt. His eyes were cold, indignant, and carried an anger he'd never directed at her before. She swallowed against a rising lump in her throat as she looked him dead in the eye, her tone clear and unwavering. "I left so I could keep you all out of this. I don't even want *you* involved right now!" she added with passion. "The only reason I'm okay with it is because you're not actually going to the lab. I'm not getting him involved. I'm not risking his life over this again."

Mike was clearly not convinced. If anything, her words only seemed to cause him more frustration. A gruff rasp entered his tone as he continued. "We've been involved from the jump, El, and we've always survived. Every time. Especially your dad. He's a fucking cop and a sharp shooter! Stop acting like you're in this alone."

"Why are you mad..." she asked suspiciously, her mind frantically trying to catch up.

"Because he deserves to know!," He said adamantly as he tossed his hands in the air. "He's been losing his mind over this for years. Plus, he can clearly help. He doesn't have to know the details. Just let me tell him you-."

She felt her face harden along with her body as she cut him off.

"NO."

Mike's mouth snapped shut abruptly as he registered the look in her eye. His jaw was set tightly. Frustration danced in his eyes. In the dark light he almost looked like a stranger.

She swallowed hard as she pushed. "Mike... you have to promise me you won't tell him."

Mike's hard look turned into a fully indignant glare as his brows creased severely.

"Promise me." Her voice was cold. "Please."

A silent war played out between their eyes, almost hardening the snow and ice around them, before he finally exhaled heavily.

"Fine."

El felt her tight chest collapse as she let out the breath she had been holding.

"Thank you," she said softly as she turned away from him and looked out over the river self consciously.

They sat in heavy silence as they both stewed in their own frustrations. A singular question flitted up in her mind, the crux of her confusion.

"Why do you care so much?" she finally asked.

Mike sighed, his voice a tinge less angry as he spoke. "Hopper and I... A lot changed between us over the years."

"Clearly," El said sarcastically as her mind ran back through the conversation she'd listened in on. "Last time I saw you two together you were fighting with him on the porch because he cut my curfew. I'm pretty sure you punched him in the shoulder and he almost broke you in half."

At that, Mike laughed and El felt the tension crack between them. She breathed a sigh of relief. She looked up to see him smiling slightly at the memory.

"He set me up with my first access point," Mike said after a moment, his tone regaining a semblance of calm. "At the station. He bought the computer and everything. He was there through all of it while I was trying to figure out how to do all of this stuff. No one else really knows any details. Just him. We worked through it together."

"Really?" she breathed in surprise.

The visual was so... odd. Mike and her dad spending time together. Alone. It made sense, if she thought about the circumstances she had left them in but... she'd never given it a single thought.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asked thoughtfully.

Mike leaned back and stretched, his hands raking through his hair as he released some of the tension he'd been holding. "The leads on you went cold about a year ago, so he and I haven't talked as much lately." His voice trailed off as he said it, a sadness entering his tone before a dark chuckle floated out through his next words and he looked at her, a hesitant smile on his lips. "I kind of lost my mind when I found you. He wasn't really who I was thinking about for the last week. I wasn't trying to keep it from you. It just hasn't come up yet. I promise."

"Oh," she said softly before she paused. "I think I missed a lot more than I realized."

"You did," Mike said plainly.

The rock at the pit of her gut spoke next. She resolutely did not look at Mike as she asked.

"Does he... hate me?"

"No," Mike replied without hesitation. "He was so pissed when you left. He almost decked me when I told him you were gone. But we uh... we got past that." His voice trailed off to something small and contemplative. "He just wants you to come home."

Home.

Tears edged at her eyes once more at the thought. His words made the concept sound so incredibly simple.

She watched out of the corner of her eye as Mike fished out his gloves and pulled them on one by one. He then pulled a hat from his other pocket, leaned over, and slipped it snugly over El's hair.

"Thanks," she said quietly with a light laugh as she nudged him in the shoulder lightly.

Silence fell between them as the snow falling from the sky began to pick up pace. El's mind worked to turn over everything she had learned throughout the last half hour, but she just kept resolutely

returning to the memory of her father's face.

"I understand why you want to tell him," she finally said.

Mike didn't respond.

A dangerously hopeful realization dawned on her. It was obvious, but the cynicism in her veins couldn't grasp the concept. She spoke aloud to try to make it real.

"If everything goes well on the 27th we can tell him. Not before. He'd get in his truck and drive here overnight."

"Would that be so bad?" Mike asked. El shot a glare in his direction. "Okay, fine," Mike said as he rolled his eyes and put his hands up in surrender, but this time instead of glaring, he laughed. "When your dad finds out I lied to him he is going to kill me."

"I'll defend you. I can clearly take my dad," she replied with a teasing smile. Mike laughed fully this time in response. El smiled despite herself. Her heart softened a bit and allowed a whole different set of questions to surface. "Can you tell me something about him that I missed?"

Mike bit his lip as he looked at her, something sad in his eyes. "Well... he uh... he married Joyce the summer after high school graduation."

El inhaled sharply, the words feeling both like a hot knife and a warm blanket. Her smile grew and became shaky "Really?"

Mike nodded, "Yeah. They got together about a year after you left."

El looked away as a tear fell. "That's... beautiful."

The untold stories of the last seven years felt palpable in the air around them as she stared out over the dark river thinking about her dad. It felt like a gift to finally be open to the life she'd left. The clash of emotions in her chest contained and blended into a mournful contentment.

She looked back at Mike to find him staring at her. Snow flakes flecked through his black hair and beard. The whole city seemed to

reflect from his dark eyes.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. For what, she wasn't sure.

A small smile quirked onto Mike's lips in response. He leaned closer slowly, closing the gap between them. The tension of the last minutes dropped from her body as his gloved hand rose to her cheek and called her to the moment. His lips were cold as they softly pressed against hers, causing each minor sensation to feel vibrantly intense. Before she had a chance to lean into him he pulled away and dropped his forehead against hers.

"What was that for?" she asked, breathless.

"I missed you," he said simply, before he followed it with a chuckle. "Fuck, I think I even missed fighting with you."

At that, she laughed and leaned back in to catch his lips.

It felt like a perfect repeat of an old pattern, and it tugged deeply at her heart. Mike and El could get heated. It had always been in their natures. But it had always ended quickly, and always in a kiss.

It felt bizarrely romantic to kiss Mike against the backdrop of the lit up city skyline, her body racing with a clash of emotions from everything she had just been through. If she'd watched it in one of her romance movies, she would have hugged her bear tighter and swooned. She chuckled at the thought.

"What?" he asked against her lips.

"Nothing," she replied, smiling as she pulled away for a split second to speak before catching his bottom lip between hers in a playful gesture. He breathed a soft hum in reply as his other hand reached her face.

"Want to go inside? I can imagine there is a much more comfortable place to do this," he asked.

El nodded in his hands and worked to stand. Mike followed suit, picking up his backpack from the ground and carrying it in his hand as they made their way to the roof access door.



El stepped into the stairwell and languidly made her way down the steps.

On the final step her feet instantly froze.

"First apartment clear. Is the second apartment clear?"

"Clear."

Men's voices echoed on the other side of the door. El's heart smashed against her ribs as her blood ran cold. She heard the zipper of Mike's backpack echo off of the concrete walls.

A loud click went off by her ear. El jerked around to see a black handgun at the ready in Mike's hands. The sight was so shocking she almost forgot for a split second the danger they were in until -

"Subjects 017 and 008 are confirmed retrieved." a voice echoed from the hallway.

A crackling voice replied via radio. Despite the scratchy connection it sounded like smooth ice. It was the last voice she ever wanted to hear in her life.

"Any sign of Subject 011?"

"*Papa...*" she breathed involuntarily.

"No, sir," said a man in the hallway.

"Keep looking. And if you find the man with her, kill him."

## **Notes for the Chapter:**

This ride just got bumpy.

Thank you for reading and I would love to hear from you.

- L -

## 14. Chapter 14

Before the first word was fully out of the mouth of the man on the other side of the door, Mike knew exactly what had happened. A wave of intense guilt hit him concurrently with mind-wiping terror. Fight or flight kicked into full force and shot through his veins, the two sensations warring for dominance over his actions.

Fight won quickly.

He wasted no time to arm himself, slipping his backpack forward, hand going directly for his weapon, before he pushed his backpack back on. The click of the safety in his shaking hands caused El to whip her head back in shock. In her expression was a mixture of intense emotions he couldn't begin to decipher in the moment.

"Subjects 017 and 008 are confirmed retrieved."

He could, however, decipher the emotion that entered her eyes at those words.

Sev's innocent face floated through his mind.

Mike felt his stomach bottom out.

The room began to spin.

A voice echoed scratchy from a radio.

"Any sign of Subject 011?"

"*Papa...*" El breathed suddenly, her voice almost inaudible.

Something primal, from the deepest part of him, shot up at instinct, trying to take control of his body. The need urged him to step in front of her, to shield her behind him, to protect her and take the lead. It was a stupid impulse, considering who she was, yet it was insanely difficult to fight off.

He forced his feet to stay planted in the spot as his heartbeat continued to smash against his ribs. The moments seemed to stretch

for days between each beat.

"No, sir," said the man in the hallway.

"Keep looking," Brenner's voice echoed through the radio. "And if you find the man with her, kill him."

Fear didn't trigger through Mike at his threat.

Only anger.

A pulsating dark rod of anger.

Anger for the girls who were gone. Anger at himself for getting them into this crisis

Anger for the years that had led up to this moment.

More than anything, anger at the voice of the man who had ruined the life of the girl he loved.

At that, Mike felt his adrenalin kick in in full. His every nerve took on a bizarre focus he hadn't felt in over ten years.

His hands stopped shaking.

No one was killing him tonight.

"We're sending in backup. ETA five minutes."

El's eyes dropped shut suddenly, her face in heavy concentration. A crackling screech emitted from what Mike could only guess was the radio Brenner's voice had just echoed from. The lights began to flash like an inconsistent strobe.

The next thing he knew her hand was in the air and the metal door blew off its hinges like a bomb. He ducked and covered, his whole body shaking against the raw power crashing through the air, as concrete dust rained back on them.

A guttural scream cut through the hallway, halted abruptly by a deafening crunch.

"Do not shoot unless you absolutely have to," El hissed toward him, her voice almost silent, before she stalked through the now gaping hole in the wall.

The scene that greeted them was dire.

Three bodies laid lifeless in the hallway, the one El had crushed only obvious due to the door on top of it. The door to Mike's apartment hung dangerously off of its hinges. His neighbor's apartment door was simply ajar.

Mike stopped in his tracks and pointed over El's shoulder silently to that location. The stock of a rifle was visible directly on the other side of the wall, peeking out ever so slightly, giving up the location of its operator.

El twitched and began to shake as she looked in that direction. Mike watched as the rifle bent aggressively, before it fell to the ground with a heavy thud of a body.

"Cover me," she breathed as she stalked to the door. Mike did his best, a tremble returning to his hands as she stepped over the man without hesitation and entered the room.

It was so odd to re-enter the room where they had spent the last two nights. It was nothing like the cocoon of safety they had created.

It was in complete disarray. No bodies laid in the room, but the desk was flipped, couch cushions were strewn and destroyed. The TV was smashed against the floor. Cold air rushed through a broken window.

Something crunched under Mike's foot as he moved past the bed. He looked down quickly to the sight of a discarded syringe.

"She's gone." El's voice shook, containing fear for the first time.

El bent down abruptly and grabbed her black bag before turning on a dime and rushing back toward the entrance.

"Your place." she breathed. Mike followed as he had before, walking half backward in case someone popped up unannounced in the room, feeling oddly grateful he had watched one too many action movies

through the years, as they seemed to serve as an impulsive guide to his movements. They paused at the doorway as El peeked into the hall. She waved him along. They had to take an indirect route to the door to avoid the bodies.

Movement could be heard in his apartment, but when they entered no one was visible. The hair on the back of his neck stood up, causing Mike to feel an invisible target on his back as they inched in.

Four more dead bodies lied on the ground around his apartment. Sev had put up one hell of a fight.

"Gone..." El's voice was nothing more than air, but he could hear her pain distinctly.

Mike shuddered. His eyes fell onto his computer desk. He gasped as a stark realization hit him in his sternum.

"Your files." He breathed directly into her ear, his lips grazing against her, no space between them so as to not be overheard. "We need them."

El nodded shakily, not looking at him as she became the cover, moving them toward the desk as she walked backward. Mike scrambled to the ground beneath his desk as El stood with her back to him. His hands would hardly cooperate as he fought to open the casing of his computer tower in order to extract the hard drive that contained every file he had ever stolen about El Hopper.

The idea of them getting their hands on all of her information gave him the rush of focus he needed. His fingers stopped shaking just long enough for him to pull the hard drive out and pocket it into his jacket.

He picked his gun back up, breathing a sigh of relief.

He worked his way out from under the table when –

**BANG**

A gunshot echoed through the air, bursting his eardrums. The concrete on the floor directly in front of his eyes exploded, inches

from his face. Shrapnel from the busted floor shot into his face, causing him to wince as his mind emptied to a blank slate of shock and fear.

El stalked forward without warning, a raw and terrifying growl shooting from her mouth and filling the room. Through his watering eyes he could see her hand in a clench in front of her. Mike heard the rifle drop to the ground as the horrifying sound of a man choking cut through the room. She did not relent, her body rigid and unforgiving.

After what felt like an eternity, a body finally fell from the dividing wall in his kitchen and rolled into sight.

El wasted no time turning back to Mike, her eyes containing a level of dark rage he had never seen before. Both of her nostrils were bleeding and the skin around her eyes was beginning to look bruised.

He scrambled to his feet almost in a trance, unable to look away from her. She walked to him resolutely, took his free hand, and for the first time, she ran. Mike did not hesitate. He followed as fast as he could as they left his now decimated apartment.

Bootsteps echoed faintly from the main stairwell as they entered the hall. El tugged Mike's arm roughly in the direction of the roof. They rushed down the hall, careful to avoid the bodies littering the floor. They scrambled around the rubble of the exploded doorway.

El twitched her head and the lights all around them went out as they shot up the staircase. They exited back onto the roof just seconds later.

The snowfall had become thicker in the intervening moments since they had left the roof, under entirely different circumstances, leaving them dusted within seconds of stepping out into the open night. El darted to their right, toward the edge of the roof, her movements a clear indication that she had a plan. They reached the edge. She peered over it as he pulled up behind her, overlooking the street below. She spun around to the path they had left through the snow and wiped her hand aggressively through the air.

The snow smoothed, obscuring their tracks.

"Hold onto me." She stated in clear command as she looked back over the edge.

Mike did not ask questions. He pocketed his handgun quickly and laced his arm beneath her backpack and around her waist.

She felt so small against him as he pressed his eyes shut, yet he felt full trust for whatever she was about to do.

"Jump on three."

He took a deep breath and shut his eyes.

"1"

A memory shot through him, a flash behind his eyes of far off dark water. He knew what was coming.

"2"

He pumped his legs and instantly...

"3"

- - *gravity shifted* - -

He felt the most bizarre sensation of his life, for the second time.

It did not feel like flying. It simply felt like defying physics. His body at the mercy of someone who could bend laws of nature.

Before he knew it they landed hard into a snowbank. He opened his eyes wide as he laid on his back and tried to catch his breath. He looked around to find they were on top of the roof across the street. The sensation was almost exhilarating despite the circumstances. He looked back and saw his own roof two stories above them, 30 feet away, across a full city street.

"Come on," El beckoned without pause as she scrambled to her feet. Mike pulled his focus back and followed. They ran across the length of the new building's roof.

Halfway across the expanse, Mike's mind jumped fully back into play. He grabbed El's arm and pulled her roughly behind a large metal structure.

"What are you –"

Mike held his finger up to his lips forcefully as he peeked out ever so slightly back to the roof they had left. El understood, twitching once more as their latest set of footprints obscured into an unbroken blanket of powdery white.

His instincts were right.

No less than six men, rifles at the ready, appeared at the edge of the roof less than a moment later, looking over the edge. They were about fifty feet away in the slightly obscuring snowfall. Their voices were almost unintelligible. The radio faintly echoed.

"Roof clear," a voice called into a radio. The men disappeared from the edge as quickly as they'd appeared. Mike exhaled the breath he had been holding and looked over at El.

She looked back at him, her eyes wide yet glassy, not focusing easily on him.

"We need to find a place to hide. You're completely drained."

El nodded slowly. "One more roof." She said shakily. She closed her eyes and breathed slowly, seemingly working to gather her strength.

"Are you sure?" Mike asked as his arm snaked around her shoulder.

"Not safe yet." She said, her voice hollow as she leaned her head against the cold metal structure that concealed them. Mike nodded bleakly. He waited in the cold while she breathed, rubbing soft circles on her back as the silence allowed the truth of their circumstances to fully sink into his mind for the first time.

His guilt was undeniable and worked to choke him.

He had absolutely failed the girls.



Judging by the syringes he had seen littered across the floor in both apartments, he worked to convince himself that both of the girls were simply drugged. He had seen no proof that either of them had been killed. ...not there, at least...

It was nowhere near enough proof to calm his nerves.

He spied his gaze back at El and felt a small break in his panic as a new thought consumed him.

It had been so long since he had witnessed the full power she contained.

They had spent over two years together in relative safety. In those years her powers had become an adorably lovable addition to their moments together, and nothing more. He had not watched her kill anyone, or *anything*, since he was twelve. Since the first week he had known her.

Mike considered himself a good person. He didn't necessarily *like* death or blood. So, his heart's response to her deadly strength was resolutely odd, though it felt just the same as it had first time, all those years ago.

Complete and utter awe.

That probably said as much about him as it said about her.

"Okay, one more roof," she said, cutting into his thoughts as she pushed herself up, hands on her knees. Mike followed and rose up on now numb and wet feet.

The snow falling around them was now officially thick enough to conceal their movements. It was a small solace.

Her body flagged against him as she began to walk. He channeled every ounce of thought and energy into holding her upright and leading the way to the edge of the roof.

They had a lucky break.

The neighboring building was directly adjacent and the same height,

meaning they only had to simply cross the 18-inch expanse between the two buildings. Mike went first, his long legs making easy work of the climb over the barriers and the small gap. El had a bit more trouble, so he did the work for her, pulling her by the arm and then the waist to help her clear the barrier.

She stumbled against him as her feet crossed the expanse, causing him to fall backward into a snowbank, breaking her fall.

"I'm sorry," she breathed, her eyes barely open on top of him.

"I'm fine," he whispered, his arm gripping more tightly around her waist as he struggled to pull them to standing. Once on their feet, Mike took in their new surroundings.

It was hard to make out in the darkness and snow, but it looked like they had landed on a residential roof. An abandoned set of patio furniture sat off to their left, almost unrecognizable beneath the thick blanket of snow it had accumulated over the past week.

He scanned across the open space. His eyes fell on a small outcropped concrete structure off to the right toward the back of the building. He breathed a sigh of relief.

It only seemed to make space for his utter guilt to rush in again.

He tried to swallow it back and didn't speak as he led her toward the structure.

"In here," he whispered.

---

El nodded, exceptionally glad that she could just follow Mike's lead. She popped the lock on the door when he asked, not before shooting a bit of energy across their path to obscure their snowy footprints one last time, just in case. She stepped in shakily. Mike rushed inside behind her.

He closed the door. She slipped the lock. They were in pure blackness.

The sound of a zipper echoed off of the walls before a single beam of light shot from a flashlight in Mike's hand. What greeted them was a storage closet, filled with patio furniture, collapsible tables and cleaning supplies.

"FUCK."

Mike's voice was quiet, but the panic within it was enough to almost knock her over.

He dropped his bag to the ground and bent over, his hands against his knees as he struggled to breathe.

El's body wavered. She leaned back against the door but her eyes did not leave him.

"I fucked up. I am so sorry," he gasped through harsh breaths. "We didn't say a damn thing on that call. I don't..."

El's heart sank as she took in his words and the story of how they'd gotten here began to come together in her mind. Mike straightened up and began to pace in the tiny space, his gloved hand raking through his hair. "Their phone hasn't had one for two years. I check for taps all the time. Why the FUCK didn't I check."

"I thought it was... was someone else.... paging all day," he added as he looked up at her, his eyes dancing with fire in the beam of light. "I just... I didn't think a call with Will would *matter*. When Hopper showed up on the line, I bet those *fuckers* sent out that crew instantly."

Mike kicked a table against the wall before he threw his hands up the air.

"We didn't say anything! Nothing that would tip them off. Are they that fucking desperate for leads that they'd come to my house with a full fucking team off of *that* call? FUCKING ASSHOLES."

"Mike..." she said weakly, her body not allowing her to calm him.

"This wouldn't have happened if I'd just called Hopper back when he paged," he bit to himself in pure self loathing.

"Mike..."

Mike stopped in his tracks and looked directly at El, his whole body shaking in the beam of the flashlight. "El, I'm so sorry."

El didn't respond.

She didn't know how to.

Her sisters were gone.

An unexpected twinge of anger shot through her as she looked at him.

Her sisters were gone.

It was a potentially fatal oversight.

She'd been guilty of the same.

More than once.

Her anger ebbed instantly before it was able to bloom. A helpless sadness took its place. Her arm felt like lead as she reached forward and touched Mike's arm. "Mike... the only reason any of us survived three nights ago is because of you. We would have all been killed or captured, totally *my* fault, without you. I know you didn't mean to. We never *mean* to. I just..." she sighed, fear rising within her in full as her legs shook and exhaustion pulled her eyes shut. "We have to get them back."

She felt Mike's arms around her waist instantly as her feet left the ground. She fell against his body, her eyes closed, as she felt him traverse the small closet. He set her down carefully on the soft surface of a patio lounge. She mercifully found she was in a corner, two walls working to hold her up.

"I... saw syringes," Mike said quietly. "I think they're not..."

"I saw too," she said weakly as she fought her eyes to open. Mike was in front of her, hands on her shoulders, his face fully illuminated by the flashlight beam that seemed to be sitting next to her.

Her eyes shot to the blood dripping down his eyebrow.

"You're hurt," she breathed, attempting to reach up.

"I'm fine," he said offhandedly as he caught her hand and pushed it back down softly. "I just took a face full of concrete when the gunshot landed."

A firerod of energy shot through her body at his words.

She felt herself sneer. An untapped source of black rage woke her momentarily from her exhaustion as Brenner's voice echoed through her body.

*'...Kill him...'*

"El, I'm okay. Really," Mike reassured, seeming to notice her turn to darkness.

El nodded, pulling herself out of her thoughts as she looked at him. Her vision felt hazy.

"We have to find my sisters," she breathed.

Mike was emphatic as he responded. "If we tried to get them now we'd both get killed. You aren't strong enough. You're completely drained."

Her shoulders dropped. She hated the fact that he was right.

It had been a long time since she had exerted that much energy. She almost felt out of practice. Her body felt like it had been rammed by a car.

"I need to track them," she said suddenly. She moved to pull her backpack off of her back. Mike's hands joined hers in the attempt to pull the straps off of her shoulders. Her hands expertly located the small front pocket containing her Walkman. Mike took her bag and placed it on the floor as she shakily slipped the headphones over her ears and flipped the machine on.

"Shut off the light."

Mike obeyed.

Static instantly drowned her into the Void.

*Kali appeared on a gurney, fully strapped in. Her hair was splayed messily against her face. She had a deep cut on her chin, but she did not look dead.*

*El got as close as she could to see her sister's chest rising and falling.*

*She both breathed a sigh of relief and felt a terrible sense of panic.*

*"Kali," she whispered, her voice incredibly shaky, her emotions making her forget the rules of the Void as she tried to touch her shoulder to shake her awake. Her hand went right through.*

*Suddenly, Kali was gone. In an instant. No fade. No smoke. Just... Gone.*

*El screamed in the blackness.*

Her eyes shot open in shock as she returned to the room.

"Anything?" Mike asked, his voice tight, his hands on her shoulders.

"I – I saw her," she stammered. "She's knocked out but breathing but... she... cut out? That's never happened before."

"Hey," Mike replied, his voice a shade lighter as he tried to buoy her up. "She's alive. That's really really good news."

El wasn't listening to him. She ran the sensation of her sister's instance disappearance over and over in her mind before it dawned on her.

"The concealer."

"What?"

"They have a man... A Project..." El began, "He conceals locations. I can't see things when he's there. It's why we couldn't find the lab without you. She's... Kali's in the lab now."

She choked on her words. They seemed to cut through her stomach

like a razor. Tears tickled the sides of her eyes as a helpless feeling bloomed in her chest.

"We are going to get them back," Mike said resolutely. "I promise."

El nodded at his words, her eyes staring blankly out into the black room. She tried to drink his words to soothe her ache as she laid her head back against the wall. She slipped her headphones off her ears and dropped them around her neck, her fingertips numb.

"You need to rest, El."

El nodded and let her eyes slip shut. Mike's hands left her shoulders. Light illuminated through her eyelids and she heard his footsteps echo back to the front door. She listened as he collected his backpack and returned. His weight was suddenly present on the cushion beside her.

She tried to rest, but her mind was too filled with terrible thoughts of what could be happening just blocks away. Things she was helpless in the moment to stop.

Her eyes slid open and she watched Mike mindlessly as he worked through a frenzy of motion with his things, desperate to experience anything other than the catapulting sensation of terror and loss racking through her body.

She watched as Mike pulled his black gun from his pocket and clicked the safety back on. He placed it down. Second, he reached into his other pocket and gingerly removed an odd silver contraption that she could only guess was the hard drive, or whatever he called it. He carefully removed a shirt from his bag and wrapped the piece of technology in it before placing it down carefully on his other side.

After that, he began to remove the contents of the bag haphazardly, his hands visibly shaking, while he looked for something. El's eyes narrowed curiously as a second silver gun appeared and was placed in the crease between them, followed by four small cardboard boxes of ammunition.

Next, he carelessly tossed a manila envelope out of the bag. The

contents slipped out and strew across the space between them.

Her hand lazily collected the papers in an attempt to help him with whatever he was doing. She pulled the materials up to her sight as she tried to place them back in the envelope, only stopping when the beam of the flashlight illuminated a foreign name.

It was a birth certificate.

"Who is Justin Simms?" she asked wearily.

"Oh that's uh... That's insurance." He replied opaquely, not looking at her as he finally pulled out a first aid kit from the bottom of the bag and began to unlatch the container.

She sifted through the materials now in her hands, her curiosity serving as a solid distraction from the contents of her thoughts. A passport and a driver's license were pressed into her black gloves. She eased the passport open to find Mike's picture, plain as day, next to the name "Justin Simms".

"You have an alias?" she whispered in surprise, her brows knit in the utmost confusion.

"How do you think I knew so much about the guy's operation on the 4th floor?" Mike replied, as though it was the most natural thing in the world. His fingers landed on an alcohol pad in the first aid kit. "He's the reason I found out about the collective in the first place. I came down from Boston and got this a couple of years back. The uh... the cell phones and the beeper are under Justin Simms so they can't find them to tap them."

El's eyes went wide as she looked at him. "Holy shit. That's genius."

"Thanks," he said, catching her eye. "It just makes things easier in case... something like tonight happens. Or...happened, I guess." Mike winced as he sighed, nerves re-entering his expression in full as he ripped open the alcohol pad packet in his fingers. "Gotta be careful with these assholes."

"Tell me about it," she said darkly.



"Stay still. Let me clean you up."

Mike leaned over to her and she shifted in his direction. His fingers tickled against her upper lip as he began to carefully wipe away the blood from her nose with an icy cold pad.

She watched him, his skin pale in the beam of the flashlight, his false identity still within her fingers as he tended to her. The cold steel of his silver gun was pressed against her thigh.

Mike had just lost his home. He'd almost lost his life. He was now a human bullseye in the middle of the exact situation she had worked so hard to keep him out of. But he seemed...oddly prepared for the moment.

It was intriguing.

"Do you know how to use the gun?" she asked.

"Of course I do," he replied, his tone indignant, almost insulted as he reached for a second pad.

"Did Nancy teach you?"

Mike shook his head. "Your dad taught me."

"Really?" she said in surprise. She tried to picture it and resolutely failed. "That's so weird..."

"I'm actually a pretty good shot, you know," Mike whispered softly, no need to raise his voice in the intimacy of their closeness while he worked, "You should have let me help back there."

El shuddered involuntarily at the thought, her mind returning to their greater circumstances as her thoughts went dark. "Mike..." she sighed. "Trust me. You do not want to know what it's like to kill someone. Even if it's in self defense."

Mike didn't respond to that. He shifted and ripped open a third pad before he began work under her second nostril.

Not wanting to go down the mental path he'd triggered in her, she

pulled her thoughts back to Mike.

"So, you can shoot a gun, you use a false identity, and you break into government files and steal them for a living..."

Mike's eyes flitted up to meet hers as his fingers stilled against her lip. "Yes?"

Despite everything, a small smile crept onto El's lips. "You turned into a full on criminal, Mike Wheeler."

"Nah," he refuted, waving his hand to brush off the accusation. His voice was contemplative and completely serious as he continued. "I don't see it like that. I think of myself more as... unlawful good. Like... a dark paladin."

The unexpected laugh that erupted behind El's teeth was so strong she almost couldn't hold it in. It shot from her nose in a loud snort instead. Mike's eyes widened in surprise.

"You are a *dork*," she whispered, infinitely grateful for the sensation of laughter as she rolled her eyes. "You're the most badass dork I've ever met. But you are a *dork*."

Mike's fingers stopped moving against her lip, his expression almost shy. His voice completely changed when he spoke. "Did you just call me a badass?"

"Yeah..." she breathed as she weakly gestured to his things that were strewn around them. "This whole uh... secret vigilante in a backpack thing you have going on? It's...pretty badass."

Even in the flashlight beam, even in their life and death moment, she saw Mike blush furiously.

"You're not exactly the boyfriend I had when I was 16," she reflected as she looked into his dark eyes. It was only clear to her how incredibly *true* it was as the words left her lips.

At that, his lip quirked up in a wry smile. He focused back on her lip, the cold sensation returning. "No, I'm not. That kid was kind of a wuss."

El shook her head tiredly, her words soft as air. "No he wasn't. He was a sweetheart."

"I'm still a sweetheart," Mike retorted as he swiped one last time against her lip and pulled his hand away for good. "Just a... *badass* sweetheart."

He'd meant it as a joke, but it struck her as a fact.

He'd always been the smartest person in the room. A leader. Quick on his feet with a healthy disdain for authority. But there was an undeniable strength around all of it now. Something... cultivated. Something gritty. Unbending. Yet he was still soft... at least with her.

She regarded him for a moment, drinking in his features in the harsh beam of light, as it struck her in full how much of a man he'd become.

El found herself smiling, despite it all. She reached into the first aid kit on Mike's lap. Pulling up a reserve of energy, she took two alcohol pads from the kit and ripped the first one open with her teeth. She reached up and gently held back his hair to expose the freshly clotted wound directly above his right eyebrow.

"It's fine," Mike said, trying to brush her hand away. "You should rest."

"Will you let me take care of you, please?" she cut in stubbornly, her eyes not leaving his as she fought to reach his face. Her voice softened as she added, "You always do it for me."

At that, Mike quelled his protests, his gaze on her as El delicately touched the alcohol pad to the cut, directly above his right eyebrow. Mike winced. The wound showed itself not to be too terrible as she cleaned it out, but it was somewhat deep.

"This might scar, I'm sorry." She whispered as she continued to lightly dab against it.

"I guess I'll just look more badass then," he replied sarcastically.

"You know, I'm sorry I said it," El replied. "I think it's going to your

head."

"It is." He replied simply with a nod, making El snicker.

The small alcove descended into silence as she finished tending to his wound. She tried to dress it with a large bandage as her hands began to shake. The small effort to help him had taken all of the minimal energy reserve she'd had left.

Mike's fingers reached up to hers, grabbing her hands as she attempted to pat the bandage on. "Thank you," he said kindly. "I can do it. You need to sleep, El."

She could do nothing but nod as she eased back into her corner.

The brief levity of their conversation faded off of her quickly as her body gave into exhaustion. She shivered, not just from the cold, as she allowed her thoughts to return to their current crisis.

They were gone.

They were with Brenner.

Tears sprung into her eyes for the first time. She let out a shuddering moan.

"We're going to find them," Mike said, his voice soft and reassuring as the weight of his hand appeared on her shoulder. "Please sleep. I'll stay awake. Then..." his voice cut out for a minute before he finished. "Then, I know a place we can hide out a few blocks away while we make a new plan."

El nodded blindly.

She listened to Mike's hands move around the space, picking up the contents of his backpack piece by piece until a final zip echoed and she perceived the light of the flashlight to disappear behind her eyelids.

She could hear Mike's shallow breaths beside her, his anxiety clearly echoing through the pure blackness.

Despite the fact that it was his oversight that had gotten them into their current state of affairs, she couldn't help but feel guilty in the moment that he was wrapped into her larger mess.

But she also felt... grateful.

She was shockingly surprised to feel it.

She was grateful he was here with her. In this cold storage closet. Back to back with her, wielding a pistol and a plan.

A seemingly perfect partner in crime.

She shifted and dropped her head against his shoulder. She felt around blindly until she found his hand. He took her fingers between his willingly and dropped his head against hers as her body tugged her mind into a fitful rest.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Scraped out of there by the skin of their teeth.

Let me know what you're thinking. I want to hear you.

Next chapter Friday ;)

- L -

## 15. Chapter 15

### Summary for the Chapter:

Hi my lovely readers! I know there are a lot of guests without accounts who read here, so I started a Tumblr in case you'd like another way to get notifications when I update! I'm 'dancingskygreen' if you want to follow along there. I probably won't post chapters for Full Circle directly there so as not to spoil anything for anyone who hasn't read yet, but I'll post when updates occur :)

Okay, get ready for an emotional rollercoaster.

The snow was thick in the black. It dropped against her eyelids with a tickling sensation, slowly drowning her in the eerie nothing.

She screamed, but no sound came out.

She kicked, but her legs did not move.

The snow continued its slow assault on her body.

*"-Eleven-"*

His voice echoed like cold ice through her bones, causing her rigidity to worsen as she fought against her frozen limbs.

*"-Eleven-"*

Closer, clearer

*"-Eleven-"*

He appeared beside her, antiseptic and cultivated as he'd always been. He studied her from above, his white coat pressed, his white hair coiffed. His expression was shaded in a lined and hollow kindness, but she could sense his unfeeling core beneath.

The snow fell thicker upon her body, skewing her knowledge of what

dimension she was in.

*'Papa.'* She tried to move her lips, but her voice did not sound.

"We have missed you," he continued. "It is time to return with your sister."

Kali stepped out from behind him, tears of shame filtering from her eyes as she looked at her feet.

*'NO.'*

Her long wild hair was gone, shaved at the roots. Her body draped in a hospital gown exactly like the one she knew she was wearing, if she could move to look.

Kali's eyes slowly rose to meet hers. Hollow, empty, broken. She opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out –

---

El awoke with a start in a room so dark she wasn't certain she was awake. Her breath came in gasps. Her blood felt too thick in her veins, beating against skin so tight that it threatened to burst.

Fear from the depths of her core radiated through her. Fear that belonged to him.

She raced through her thoughts to try pull her rational mind to the surface, to make sense of where she was. To serve as proof that she hadn't awoken... there.

A flash of a roof seared across her mind, and with it, reality smacked against her consciousness.

She gasped as he whole body shook a new panic. The one she had escaped through exhaustion but now had the energy to feel in full. Her heart sped up and her eyes narrowed in the black as the details of the night rushed into her mind.

White hot rage, fueled by her nightmare and a burst of energy, shot through her veins.

Papa.

No more.

She catapulted to her feet.

"El?"

A frenzy of movement occurred beside her before a beam of flashlight illuminated the room. Mike's worried face came into view, all dark eyes and knitted eyebrows.

"I have to find my sisters." She declared through her heaving breaths.

"It's only been an hour," Mike replied warily as he rubbed his eye. "We need to stay here. The streets are probably crawling with those guys looking for us right now."

"I have to find my sisters." She repeated sternly. El kicked her foot blindly against the ground until she located her bag. She achingly hoisted it onto her back.

"Now? El – "

"Now." El stated in cold command.

"We need to - "

She drowned out Mike's voice as she pushed through the tangle of furniture and to the door. Her frenzied thoughts, still coated thick with her nightmare, pushed her out into the night with a shaky laser focus.

All she could see was Kali's face. All she could hear was Papa.

Mike cursed behind her, tight on her heels as she exited the door.

The snow had stopped falling, leaving crisp cold air as the only thing in the sky as she made her way out into the dark night. She stalked toward the exit door with a frenzy, her combat boots crashing through the thick snow at a speed faster than her body could sustain. She tripped twice, not bothering to brush the snow from her knees as



she scrambled up and continued each time, fueled by nothing but anger and adrenalin.

"El-"

Mike's long legs gave him the advantage as he appeared beside her, tugging his backpack on as he worked to get her attention.

"El, please stop."

They reached the exit door and she swung it open. She twitched and knocked out the lights to obscure the sight of the security cameras as she started her descent down the staircase.

Mike's whispers of protest sounded directly in her ear on constant repeat as they worked through four stories of dark stairwells to the ground level, coming out through a utility door in a dark alley.

The ground was blanketed in white as she stepped out into the untouched snow, without a person in sight.

Suddenly, Mike pulled on her arm, hard. El stumbled in surprise, almost catapulting to the right before Mike took control and successfully pinned her against the cold brick wall of the building, his hand pressing into her shoulder, his other arm blocking her exit.

"Will you listen to me?" he hissed, his face so close their noses were almost touching. Protestation had long left his tone. It now held pure frustration.

El tried to push him off, but halted when she looked into his eyes. He stared at her with pure determination, his breath fogging the miniscule space between them. Fear laced his expression and rushed over her like cold water, halting her fight or flight reaction as he spoke.

"You just stumbled down those stairs like you were drunk," he stated in a biting whisper. "What's your endgame here?"

"I have to find my sisters." She protested in reply, her voice feeling weaker than it had felt just seconds prior.

"And. We. Will. I promise you. We will," Mike said, his voice pleading yet resolute as he spoke maddening words of sense. "But we won't succeed like this. Your sisters are probably still drugged at this point. It's been less than two hours. The lab will be crawling with extra security and we don't have the strength or the plan to take on an entire lab filled with full strength Projects just like you."

El felt an odd childlike shame in his gaze.

His voice and eyes became softer as he sighed, sagging against her. "I know this fucking sucks, El. I hate it too. I wish we could just go, but we *can't*."

"I know," she finally croaked, hating the words with every fiber of her being, as she felt her adrenalin crash and leave her body.

Mike's hand loosened against her shoulder as he looked up and down the alley warily. "Do you want to go back upstairs? Or should we keep moving? The next place is about three blocks away. I didn't want to move us yet... but we're already out..."

"Keep moving. I don't want to keep still." She replied sullenly.

Mike nodded and wasted no time as he stepped back, giving her space to move for the first time. "This way," he whispered as he began to walk in shadow down the alley. He peeked out and looked both ways three times at the end of the alley before he beckoned to her and sprinted out of the shadow, across the snow drifted street, and into the alley on the opposite side.

El trudged behind him, her feet feeling heavy as deep defeat took over her emotions, the aftermath of her rush feeling like it had broken straight through her spirit.

She worked her best to focus on Mike to keep her thoughts from consuming her. His footfalls and his movements. The echoes of his breath. How he looked over to ensure she was still beside him every fifteen seconds.

But every small movement or sound around them called to her in paranoid attention, heightened by the eeriness of the snow covered

night. The echoes off of the wall. Far off cars. Voices from apartments in the city that never sleeps.

She had not traveled so dangerously unobscured in a moment of emergency in years. It was a luxury she'd taken for granted for so long, afforded to her by Kali's incredible powers. The thought caused her to choke as the loss of her sister became that much more palpable. It grew hard and hollow in her chest.

It had been years. Years of running. Years of hiding. Years of relying only on each other, their dreams and plans the only thing the other had. Years of leaving everything behind in search of a final solution that would break them free.

They had gotten *so close* before Kali had lost her gamble.

She didn't blame Mike. There was no way he could have predicted what happened, but it didn't make the grief any easier to bear.

El tried to repeat to herself it was all going to be okay, but she couldn't promise herself that. She couldn't promise herself anything. Tears froze against her eyelashes as a new wave of fear bloomed within her veins.

Mike stopped on a dark street by a simple brown building, causing her to stumble in surprise. This time, Mike did not ask El to break in. Instead, he fished into his coat pocket and brought out a set of keys, opening the front door as he would his own home. He silently beckoned her in and led her up to the second floor.

At the end of a hallway lied a door with a light blue cursive "M" hanging over the peephole. Mike slipped in the key, shouldered the door open, and flicked on the light without having to search for the switch. He let her enter in front of him before he closed the door and secured all three of the locks.

Gauzy white curtains covered two identical windows at the back of the room, centering a tiny computer desk. A stiff light blue sofa with perfectly matched throw pillows sat off to the left facing the nicest TV she had ever seen.

"Listen," Mike started, his voice laced with nerves, causing her nerves to rise steadily in response. "If I could take you anywhere else on the entire planet I would but... this is the only place near mine that I know is empty and safe and has what we need to make another plan. I don't really have many friends in this city other than the guys who lived in my building so this -"

"- Where are we?" she finally asked, her voice wary.

She already knew the answer, but that didn't make his reply any more pleasant.

"Marissa's."

El was grateful that Mike was behind her so that he didn't catch the wide eyed cringe that came with her queasy adrenaline spike.

"I'm... I'll be right back." Mike said, his voice sounding almost dead to the world as he disappeared through a small doorway on the right that looked like it led to a kitchen.

El scanned the room glumly.

She hated places like this. With perfect matching colors. Everything in its place. Ugliness seemed expressly hidden away. It made the ugliness inside of her own mind feel all more visible. All the more out of place.

She turned to face the wall in order to collect her emotions, already splayed out in a messy array in her body before she entered the door, now even more shakily difficult to control.

The room, however, had other plans.

On the wall she was faced with the single unmatched piece in the room. A corkboard, littered with a collage of pictures. All featuring a girl who she could only assume was Marissa.

She could not look away.

*'El Clone'* echoed through her thoughts in Dustin's voice as she shakily perused the photos of the short haired brunette, brown eyed girl.

She honestly didn't see the resemblance.

The girl looked too *normal* to be anything like her.

Her eyes darted, her jaw clenching tight, around each picture of the strange girl, until her eyes found what she was looking for, what she had hoped with all of her heart not to find, in the far right corner.

Her heart raced violently as her brain begged her to look away.

She did not look away.

They looked... Happy.

In one, they held their drinks up in a cheers at a tall bar table.

In a second, she reached up on her tip toes to kiss his cheek on the top of a tall building with a beautiful summer sunset setting off the background. The wind whipping his hair as he smiled widely. His arm around her waist. Relaxed and content.

She swallowed hard against the rising lump in her throat.

The third was a photo strip from a mall photo booth. Four frames stared back at her in black and white.

Frame by frame, Mike and Marissa made funny faces. Wide eyes. Screwed expressions. Tongues out in a joke.

Mike looked like the exact adorable goof she always remembered him to be. So painfully like the memories of him that she would conjure in her saddest moments when she'd felt the most alone.

She stared, dumbstruck, feeling the physical punch deep into her gut, as Mike kissed the girl with fervor in the final frame.

*Look away*, she pleaded with everything she had.

She did not look away.

A small note written on a blue post-it was pinned next to the photo strip, written in Mike's unmistakably messy scrawl.

*'Had an amazing night. Can't wait to see you on Friday. 3 Mike 3'*

A tortured moan shook from her mouth as her chest bloomed full with the thick vines of jealousy that had been growing through her voyeuristic moment, coupled with an unbelievably staggering wave of self defeat. It worked as a funnel, sucking every dark pain in her body into a single sickening sharp focus.

It was like the pictures existed in a foreign land, through a veil El would never be able to reach. Everything looked so easy. Such a mundane every day perfection.

It was all she had ever wanted. All that her toxic world would never contain.

All she could never give him.

*It was a life.*

A terrible scream sliced through her gut at the thought and rose with fury into her throat. It had the power to knock out the wall. She swallowed down hard against it with everything she had. The intensity of her primal power instead crashed like a tidal wave throughout her chest, causing everything within her to shatter.

"El?"

---

Mike splashed warm water against his face in an attempt to feel something, anything, pleasant.

At least they'd made it safe, he reminded himself for the twentieth time. He tried to push away his frustration for how he'd had to chase her off of the roof and through the staircase, but it was proving difficult.

He could not shake the gnawing sensation that she had tried to leave him behind.

It was ridiculous, he reminded himself, as he tried to rationalize her emotional impulse in a way that didn't point back to him. She was a reckless person, filled with power. Of course someone like her would

try to rush into battle without thinking when her sister's life was at stake.

Of course she would.

It brought him no reassurance.

Mike leaned against the sink, back to the mirror, and focused on his breath while he wiped his hands dry. He scanned the small room, deeply aware of how weird it felt to be in Marissa's apartment. The place felt like it existed in a completely different dimension than his current reality.

Oddly, he realized, in some capacity it was how he'd always felt in the apartment.

He didn't have time to think about that, though. He pushed his thoughts back to the plan.

What plan?

How the hell was he supposed to come up with a plan?

He had to come up with a plan.

His terror for Sev wavered thickly over him like a drowning sensation, as it had for much of the night. Her sharp blue eyes stared back at him in his mind, silently screaming in terror, reminding him on repeat how he had let her down.

He had no rational explanation for why, but it was clear to him in his regret that he felt a responsibility to the girl. He'd seen the same terror in her that he had seen in El when they'd been so young. When he had only been able to help her in the limited capacities of a child.

Mike wasn't a child anymore, but he sure as hell felt like one.

He had resolutely failed the small innocent girl.

Mike stared at his backpack by his feet, his fingers itching to make the call he'd been yearning to make since the moment they escaped... but he fought it down as he sighed. He rubbed his temples and

pushed himself back to the living room, not wanting to be alone with his thoughts a second longer.

He crossed through the kitchen and stopped dead in his tracks in the doorway as he caught sight of El.

She stood in front of Marissa's picture collage. Her body almost visibly shaking. His eyes traced her eye line to photo strip at the lower corner.

He took a deep breath and took a tentative step into the room.

"El?"

She did not look back at him.

"Why did you bring me here?" She finally said. Her voice was ice.

Mike bit his lip and closed his eyes tight as he worked to pull up every ounce of energy he had to keep his voice even.

"It was the only option."

"Staying in that storage closet would have been better than this." She bit back.

Mike did not speak, and El was quiet for a long time as she continued to stare at the wall of pictures.

"Did you love her?" she asked, her voice so quiet he almost missed it.

Mike forced himself to breathe slowly for a minute, the direct question hitting him in complete surprise. He cursed internally at the words that floated through his head.

*Friends Don't Lie*

"I thought I did for awhile," he said quietly, forcing the words out of his mouth.

El turned around, but she didn't look at him.

He could feel her energy radiating dangerously in the air around



them. She scanned the room with a frantic nature, her eyes burning with the intensity of a trapped animal. Her breath was visible in how her body moved with each inhale. She blinked three times in quick succession, then reached for her bag.

"I can't be here," she stated suddenly as she turned and reached for the door.

So many things happened in Mike at once.

A rush of bitter resentment flooded his veins. Something inside of him screamed. But mostly, the boy who had watched her crawl from his window so many years ago revved up and took action, not willing to make the same mistake twice.

"No." Mike barked as he stepped forward and grabbed her arm. She spun around, her eyes almost dripping with pain.

"I promised you!" she screamed out of nowhere directly into his face, causing him to almost stumble in surprise. "I promised you I would come back when I was safe! I get it, I get why you moved on, but to rub it in my face like this?!"

Mike gaped at her as her words struck him like knives, one of the daggers hitting him like a bullseye straight into the trigger of his long held pain. He tried catch his emotions, but they overwhelmed him easily as they bubbled like bile in the back of his mouth.

"You promised?" Mike repeated, his voice slow and low as his eyes narrowed directly onto hers. "You broke that promise."

"It wasn't sa—"

"Do you realize how unfair that is? You could have found me any day!"

He felt it break open, years of pain becoming passion as the words spilled from his mouth, spurned by her selfish words. "You had all of the control, Eleven. I had *nothing*. You could have found me any minute of any day of any year. But you never did. Not once. Not even a *postcard*! And then – then you tell me you had this whole time where you were safe and went out to clubs and got drunk with your

friends and you couldn't even send me a note to let me know you were alive?! Do you realize *I didn't know if you were alive?!*"

El's eyes were wide with surprise. "I didn't know how!"

"Well, you could've figured it out, El. It's not that hard. It fucking *hurt*," he spat, his chest cracking as he yelled. "Every day. *It still fucking hurts.*"

"Mike – "

"So, I'm *sorry* if I met someone else and tried, in vain mind you!" he added harshly. " - to move on. After six fucking years, because that's how long it took me. But I had *no* control over whether I would ever see you again. And you DID."

El's lip trembled as she opened her mouth to speak, but a frantic corner of Mike's mind landed on a particularly painful thought from earlier in the morning and he picked it up and ran with it without hesitation.

"Mike, I – "

" - And you're a *hypocrite* if you're going to judge me for trying to be with someone else."

"What?" Her face fell at his words, her features morphing into legitimate confusion.

"I saw it in your eyes when your sister told me about Philadelphia. You lost someone in there, didn't you?"

El froze, her face filled with blank shock.

"I wasn't going to bring it up. I don't want to dredge that up for you but – "

"That was about you..." she choked suddenly. Tears began to spill from her eyes and her whole body began to tremble.

Her reaction stopped Mike in his tracks.

"That... doesn't make sense."

"That was about you!" she cried again, with more intensity this time.

At that, something in her face fully broke. Every ounce of her anger disappeared, replaced with a fragility that looked like shattered glass. She hiccuped through fresh tears, her hands shaking as she began to hug herself. She wouldn't look at him.

Sheer confusion clouded Mike's fatigued brain as he fought to catch up with the hairpin turn she had just taken.

"What... does that mean?"

"They..." she sighed shakily, as though she was gathering the strength to speak. "They planted you in my head," she finally said, her voice so quiet and obscured by her tears that Mike had to lean in closer to understand her. "I still don't know how they did it. They showed you to me in the Void like you were... captured? God, you were... so broken."

She looked up as she said it, her eyes holding a horrifying sadness as she shuddered. "I went into there to save *you*... but you... weren't there."

Mike's jaw was on the floor as his anger took a backseat to her trauma.

"It was so stupid," she spat at herself. "I was so stupid. I was trying to get to you..." El fell silent and looked back up at him.

He knew what happened in the aftermath. He knew how the story ended... It was hard to breathe as he took in the sheer agony projecting from her eyes.

Mike hesitantly reached out to touch her. She was not hesitant in reply. El dropped against his chest in a crash, her body letting out a shuddering breath as her arms wrapped around him so tightly that it made him almost lose his breath.

Mike stared like a deer in headlights into the middle distance as he held her, his mind shocked from her tragedy, his body shocked by the

spilling of his emotions. She shook against him. She suddenly felt so small. So incredibly fragile. For a rare moment in his life, he could not come up with words to say.

He would never know how long they stood like that.

But finally, she spoke.

"I am so sorry," she breathed, stumbling over her words. "I wanted to come home but I couldn't. Thinking about home was just so... hard. So I told myself that if I didn't contact you it would keep you safe. That's all I wanted. Shit," she cursed as a dark laugh emitted from her mouth. "I did a great job of that. You're clearly safe right now, aren't you? I even fucked that up."

She pulled away and looked at him, a years long exhaustion in her eyes.

"It's not an excuse. I'm so sorry," her voice was so shaky. "You deserved... so much more."

Mike took in her words, echoing them through his mind as he watched her close her eyes and work to collect her breath. When she opened them there was something new in her eyes. She bit her lip in contemplation before she exhaled quickly and finally spoke.

"There was... there was never anyone else, Mike."

"...What?"

Mike watched her as she sniffed and wiped her nose roughly with her coat sleeve before she slipped her fingers beneath the collar of the sweater she had stolen from him so many years ago. She pulled out a silver chain necklace.

"I promised," she said with a vulnerable shrug as she let the necklace fall unceremoniously against her chest.

Mike blinked.

The light of the room reflected off of the promise ring he had given her for her sixteenth birthday, just two months before she had left.

His breath stilled as he stared at it glittering in the light as he struggled to make his voice work.

"You've had this – "

" - Every day. I don't take it off." She interjected softly as she looked away. Her hand gravitated toward the ring as she began to run it between her fingers in a nervous fashion.

Every ounce of emotion in his body resurfaced and coalesced into a singular overwhelming heartbreak. For every year. For every pain. For everything both of them had lost.

But here she stood. His ring grasped tightly between her fingers, even after all these years, as she beared her soul to him in the eye of a hurricane.

Mike exhaled everything within him as he looked at her. She looked simply exhausted. Her shoulder slumped. Veins stood out through her forehead and eyelids. Her skin was ashen and her hair was a chestnut colored ratted mess.

She was so beautiful.

She was his.

"I know what I'm in for, El," he said slowly.

She looked up, her eyes filled with vulnerability as she watched him intently.

His words fell easily from his lips. "I don't care about any of the risk. I can handle it. I don't want to lose anymore time, El. I just want to be with you. Please."

She bit her lip, her eyes widening with the same deep intensity that made him fall in love with her the first time.

"Yes," she breathed, her voice almost desperate as she nodded fervently in reply. "Yes."

Mike felt the core of his being shake in relief as she accepted him.

Finally.

He stepped forward and closed the gap between them, dropping his forehead against hers as he ran his hands across her tear stained cheeks and into her hair. She sighed in response, her breath shallow, as she looked up at him.

It was all so much, everything that swirled around them. The past traumas and the present nightmare. The deck was so insanely stacked against them. But in that moment, lost in the depths of her eyes, he saw a light at the end of the tunnel so bright that he couldn't look away. Tears laced his lashes as he whispered into her ear.

"El, I am so so sorry those deranged assholes used me to hurt you. But that's not going to happen again. We're going to get your sisters back and we're going to end this. Then we're going to clean up our tracks and you're going to be free of this. Forever. For good. No matter what it takes. And I'm going to be there with you every step of the way. Okay?"

El seemed to drink in every word he said as her eyes intently focused on his. Their connection felt like a lifeline, making him feel like they were the only people in the world.

El nodded slowly against him. "Okay."

Mike's right hand dropped from her hair and covered her hand on the ring tightly.

"And then we are going to go *home*."

He felt El's breath speed up at the words, her exhales the only punctuation on the silence.

"You promise?" she finally creaked, her lip trembling, her eyes reflecting the glimmer of hope he felt.

"Promise."

It was possible he had never meant any promise more deeply in his life.

"I love you, Mike." El suddenly breathed, without pause. Her words were slow, each syllable containing its own unique weight. "So much."

Mike breathed her words in as though they were oxygen, and something clicked back into place inside of Mike's heart.

"I am so in love with you, El Hopper," he whispered, his lips quivering into a smile as he heard the words hit the air, "I think I fell in love with you all over again last night."

"Really?"

"I think it's pretty obvious," he replied with a self deprecating laugh, "I'm really really bad at hiding it."

El laughed weakly as Mike dropped his lips to El's forehead. She leaned eagerly into his kiss.

He gathered her deeper into his arms as he resolutely worked to remind himself that this was real. She was real. He was holding her. Her words were real, in the here and now, and not the echo from a memory in his mind.

El pulled away after a moment and looked up to him sheepishly. "I'm so sorry I yelled at you..." She said in quiet voice as she winced slightly. "I get... really jealous sometimes. It's not okay."

At that, Mike laughed in full. He shook his head and rolled his eyes in reply. "Oh, I know. Don't think I've forgotten about the time you made Maggie McLaren slip and break her nose against a science table because she got too giggly with me when we were lab partners."

"I stand by that decision," El replied without hesitation, the ghost of a sly smile on her lips. "She should have known to stop touching your arm."

Mike sighed, not interested in rehashing *that* fight, as he dropped his chin to rest on her head and pulled her into him once again.

"You don't have to worry about any of this, really," he said as he gesticulated around the room. "Please believe me."

He felt her nod against him, her voice humble after a breath. "I believe you."

Her body wavered against his.

"We should sleep," he whispered. "We need our strength."

"Yeah..." El replied as she sighed, her voice darkening as reality set in on them once more.

Mike dropped one last kiss against her forehead before he pulled away and took her hand, leading her to the couch. He leaned down and haphazardly tossed off the abundant excess of throw pillows in order to give her enough space as she laid down.

She slipped off her coat and laid down, her hand pulling his as he stood to cover her with a blanket. "Stay with me."

"Of course I'm staying with you," he replied softly.

El scrunched her body as deeply into the couch as she could as Mike joined her. He could only fit if he was completely wrapped around her, but that was fine. He wasn't complaining, as he wrapped his arms tightly around her and nestled directly beside her on the pillow.

El leaned forward, her eyes still closed, as she placed a soft kiss against his lips.

Mike sighed as she pulled away. The ghost of a smile flirted across her lips as he watched her from two inches away, their noses almost touching.

The whole night played over in his mind, a mixture of horrifying and amazing moments. He hadn't had a night so intense since he was thirteen. Not since the last time he'd found her... Mike pulled her in more deeply at the thought, a sigh of relief crashing over his heart.

There was more to talk about. More for him to purge. A journey he still needed to take to completely leave the hurt she had caused him behind, but it could wait.

First, they had to get through the next day. He had a new promise to



keep.

That meant he had a decision to make... one that required him to break another promise he had made to her, just hours earlier.

It was possible that what he was about to do could completely ruin all of the ground they had just covered. All of the wounds they had just begun to heal.

He thought of Sev, and the decision was made.

There was no other way.

Right around then he felt her body lose its rigidity in his arms, signaling she was completely asleep.

Mike moved as slowly as he could so as not to wake her as he worked his way off of the couch. It took almost five minutes to remove himself completely from her embrace before he was standing.

He winced and softly shuffled to the door. He picked up his backpack, eased the door open, locked it as quietly as he could, and disappeared down the hallway.

---

El awoke in darkness, her head throbbing like a bad hangover after a dreamless sleep. She tried to work out where she was and how long she'd been asleep, but the details were a mash of bits and pieces.

Mercifully, a good one hit her first.

*'I am so in love with you, El Hopper.'*

She smiled into her stiff pillow, letting it wash over her as she bit her lip in an attempt not to cry.

But the joy was short lived as she felt more tickling the back of her mind, the details surfacing like a quickly growing weed, rising up in her mind until –

El shot to standing with a gasp, her body triggering in full panic as the events that had brought her to this weird apartment fell into

place.

"Mike?" she called, unable to contain the tremor in her voice.

Footsteps echoed from the kitchen and Mike appeared from the doorway off to her right.

"Hey," he said softly as he turned on a lamp. A soft glow lit up the blue and white room. "Are you okay?"

"We have to find my sisters." Her voice heaved.

"Yeah, I know. I – I'm a few steps ahead of you." He replied reassuringly before his voice became nervous. He began to bounce on his toes ever so slightly. "Um... come in the kitchen. I'll show you?"

El did as he asked, following him through the doorway into a small kitchen containing –

"Merry Christmas, Kid."

"...Dad..."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I keep trying to write a note at the end of this to express how unique this chapter felt to write, but I'll just say, ugh my babies have too much trauma, too much all at once. At least they now know they have each other.

I would love to hear from you, your comments make it all so worth it. Thank you to everyone who has been so vocal with me during this journey, you have made this one of my absolute favorite projects I have ever worked on.

HI HOPPER!

- L -

## 16. Chapter 16

"Merry Christmas, Kid."

She felt like she was still in a dream.

Her eyelashes and brain were both still sticky with sleep as she looked at him, her jaw unable to close. Her breath caught in her throat.

Jim Hopper straightened up from where he had been leaning against the sink and slowly removed his hat. His foreboding frame filled the tiny urban apartment in a way that made it feel like the walls were too small to contain him. He was clad in his open police jacket and a blue flannel, exactly like the day she had left.

El could see the years etched through every inch of his face. The lines of his brow were deeper. The speckles of gray throughout his hair and beard, which had once only been noticeable in certain lights, were now thick salt and pepper streaks. Their light coloring set off the deep look in his eyes as he stared at her in the silence surrounding them.

One thing was the same. As it always had been.

It was the eternal look lurking at the back of his gaze. It was a feeling in the air around them, still just as potent as it'd been the moment she shakily crawled into his police cruiser after a month in the frozen woods, when she had chosen trust over fear for one of the first times in her life.

It had always been clear. He understood her in a way almost no one else could.

For, he too had seen too much, felt too much, and known too much.

Her first kindred spirit.

She had feared this moment for so many years, knowing the pain she'd caused him and never feeling the strength to face it. But as she looked her chosen father in the eye for the first time in so long, she

was shocked to feel her fear and shame eclipsed, in brilliant relief, by a rush of desperate happiness.

Her lip trembled into a smile as the word fell from her lips.

"...Dad..."

His features softened instantly at her single utterance, years erasing from his face, as a light entered his eyes.

She stepped forward without pause and collapsed into his open arms.

The unmistakable and never changing scent of Jim Hopper, a pungent mix of coffee, cigarettes and Old Spice, assaulted her senses as she buried her face into his blue flannel shirt. His bear paw of a hand rustled the hair on the top of her head as he cleared his throat, his voice thick as his chin dropped to the top of her head. "I missed you, kid."

She only found herself hugging him harder in reply.

"You know you're grounded for a year after we get you out of this mess, right?" he whispered roughly as he squeezed her harder.

She laughed weakly as her fingers gripped into his jacket. "...I'm sorry," she finally managed, her words feeling wholly inadequate.

"Oh, I guarantee you, we'll fight about it later," he replied as he pulled back and took her by the shoulders, the knowing smirk on his lips complimenting his uncharacteristically soft eyes as he surveyed her face in a slow and thoughtful manner.

"You look good."

"You too," she replied as she roughly wiped away a tear that at some point had escaped her eye.

"That's nice of you, but you don't have to lie. I look like I feel, which is 250 pounds of shit. The drive here from Indiana in a snowstorm is a nightmare. You could have chosen an easier night to finally find this guy," he said as he shrugged in Mike's direction.

"Found him?" she asked, her brain having a hard time keeping up. She turned back to Mike to find him wide eyed and nervous. He was not looking at her or Hopper, but resolutely at his own fidgeting hands.

"Last night? After you found him last..." Hopper's hand tightened on her shoulder slowly as he too looked at the other man in the room. "Wheeler... why is she looking at me like I have two heads?" His voice took on a foreboding ring.

Mike cringed in full.

"Listen, I didn't – " Mike stuttered, his hands in the air.

"Wheeler..."

"She asked me not to – "

Mike was immediately cut off as Hopper's hand flung across the small space and pulled Mike's shirt firmly into his grasp. El jumped back in surprise, her thoughts scrambling as she attempted to grasp what the hell was going on.

"How long have you been hiding her?" Hopper growled, his face so menacingly close to Mike's that their noses were almost touching.

"Four days..." Mike eeked out, his head pulled back as Hopper leaned in in a threatening stance.

"You didn't call me for *four days*? – "

"You know what? No! I'm not doing this," Mike cried suddenly as he reached up and jerked Hopper's hand off of his shirt. "I'm calling us even. You hid her from me for a year last time. A *YEAR*. I only hid her for four days *and I called you*."

"Jesus, kid. This again?"

"A YEAR!"

BUZZ

"Oh, thank god," Mike cried hurriedly, intense relief in his voice as slunk out from the thin space Hopper had pinned him against and darted from the kitchen. "I'll let him in."

"What? Who?" El called after him.

An intense rush of nerves blew through her at the prospect of yet another person, her brain only just starting to process the presence of her father.

"Back up," Hopper interjected as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "He wanted to get out of Hawkins. I think his girlfriend just broke up with him. Good reason to want to get mixed back up into a government conspiracy."

El opened her mouth to ask who one more time before she was cut off by a new whispering voice that carried from the front door.

"Thanks for the wild goose chase, dipshit. That place wasn't open. I had to walk about ten blocks, I got lost twice. Everything was closed. Hell if I know if this is going to be any good but -"

"You don't have to whisper, she's awake." Mike's voice echoed in full as she heard the latches click on the door.

"Really?" the voice rose from a whisper to a bellow. "Ellie Hopper, where the hell are you?"

Confusion knit into El's brow as her thoughts began to collect and place the voice. She slowly turned the corner and exited kitchen into the living room.

"Steve?"

In the living room stood Steve Harrington, a little less hair, a few more smile lines, but other than that, exactly the same. His police jacket was zipped tight against his chin. A 'Deputy' patch now on the pocket where a simple 'Hawkins Police' had once been.

He was the absolute last person she had ever expected to see again.

"Well aren't you a sight for sore eyes!"

Steve shoved the bags of takeout roughly into Mike's hands without taking his eyes off of El as he rushed forward, pulled her into a gregarious hug and picked her up off the ground, completely catching El off guard.

"Where in the hell have you been, missy?" He said as he dropped her back on her feet and gripped her shoulders hard as he shook her, "I swear, we've been looking for you for years, you little shit. Don't ever do that again. Like, ever again. Do you hear me? You had us worried half to death, for years. YEARS."

"I'm... sorry?" she stuttered, never knowing she would have to apologize to *Steve Harrington*, her dad's most ridiculous employee, of all people.

"Forgiven. But, I mean it. Don't pull that shit again." He said, poking her in the shoulder for effect before he crossed back to Mike, took back the takeout, and crossed into the kitchen.

El blinked furiously, attempting in vain to process the last three minutes of her life. Hawkins, Indiana had absolutely swallowed the whole world inside the walls of this foreign and maddening apartment. The juxtaposition was dizzying, and the emotions that bubbled within her as she took it all in were too disparate for her to even be able to process exactly how she felt.

The panic was still there, of course. Kali's face floating in her mind without relief. But this? This just spun everything on its side in a time bendy swirl.

*Her dad was in the other room.*

She stepped back through the doorway in her daze to find the small table at the end of the kitchen set with Chinese take out boxes.

"Ellie, I hope you like Chow Mein. No one knew what you'd want," Steve said as he leaned back and propped his legs up against the window sill, devouring a box of noodles.

"That's fine," she said quietly as she tried to take her seat, but her father's arm lightly stopped her.

"Eat with me in the living room. Let's let these two catch up," he said as he crossed back to the exit. Something new had entered his voice, and in response the guilt she had so mercifully not felt upon seeing him for the first time bubbled into her throat.

Steve handed her a box of take out and some chop sticks. She took it wordlessly and followed her dad from the kitchen.

Mike passed her as she left the room. He bit his lip apprehensively, his look skittish.

But she didn't have time to dwell on that. Her nerves were too jittery as she watched Hopper take a seat on the couch where she had just been sleeping. He drew out his box of cigarettes and lit one up. El smirked to herself as the smoke rose from his puff and mingled with the gauzy feminine curtains against the dark windows, staining the perfect room in a way that made her feel slightly more at home. He took a long drag before he finally looked in her direction.

She hesitantly sat next to him and busied herself with opening her box of Chow Mein.

"You okay, kid?" he started. "If Wheeler told me anything true, which I'm seriously starting to doubt, you guys got in a pretty nasty scrap last night."

"I'm okay," she replied, trying to focus on the facts. "My sisters... they got taken."

"Yep, and we're going to figure that out," he said simply.

She looked up at his words in surprise. "Thanks," she said quietly.

He nodded before he looked back down and began to open his meal. "Of course."

They ate for a moment, the air between them thick and awkward. So many questions and answers left floating in the ether between them, ready to be tackled, neither of them knowing how.

He spoke first.



"So, care to tell me where the hell you've been all these years?" His voice was casual, but in it she could hear something deeper. It was the way he always talked when his emotions were close to breaking the surface.

El swallowed against a growing lump in her throat. She was completely unprepared for this moment. She wanted to brush off the question, not answer for her actions, and bury herself in her box of Chow Mein. However, something in her, something that hadn't existed the last time she'd seen him, took the lead.

"I started in Chicago," she said as her eyes focused on her food, "Then a cabin off Lake Superior for a couple of years. We jumped the border up to Canada after that. Then there was the farm house in Iowa, that one was nice. Peaceful. Then Philadelphia for a long time until everything there went to shit. That put me outside of Philly, then down to Maryland... and now... here."

Hopper nodded as he stabbed into his box of food, his large fingers struggling with the chop sticks.

"I think I caught wind of you while you were Iowa," he said after a moment, something forlorn entering his voice with more intensity. "Didn't get to you in time, though."

The lump in her throat grew to a painful level before she finally spoke a truth she didn't want to voice. "I wouldn't have come back if you'd found me, Dad. Even though I'd wanted to."

He looked up, and the pain that he'd been holding back was finally apparent in his eyes. "You wanted to come home?"

"Of course," she said simply, her eyes misting as she looked at him. "I never wanted to leave at all."

He put down his food at that. He rested his elbows against his knees and gazed over to her, something growing heavier in his eyes by the minute. "Then you've gotta explain to me what the hell happened that made you think I couldn't help you."

El swallowed, the center of the conversation coming to a head in a

way that made her chest ache with guilt.

"You couldn't have helped me with it." She said finally, her voice sounding so small.

He raised his eyebrows in retort.

She sighed as she set down her own food and turned to him. "They found me. In my mind..."

What followed was the most detailed account of her experience that she had ever shared with anyone. She told him everything; humbly attempting to give him the explanation he deserved. She explained in detail the pock marked blue eyed man that had infiltrated her mind. His personal threats. Every detail that she had never told a single soul, details she hadn't even yet shared with Mike.

Speaking about it after so long caused helpless tears to rise to her eyes.

Tears for the girl she'd been. Tears for the girl who had stood over her father in the night, making the impossible decision to not say goodbye. Tears for the girl who had always been too young for everything she'd suffered through.

Also, tears for her father's pain.

Hopper was quiet. He listened. He asked thoughtful questions. He was patient. He showed her more kindness in her explanation than she ever felt she deserved. And when she finally finished she saw his lip arch up into a small sad smile.

"You've grown up, kid." he said with a nod.

He looked away, but his arm wrapped around her shoulder and pulled her close.

There was an acceptance in his touch that it made her breath catch.

In that moment, pinned to her father's side, something took a step toward mending inside of her. A closure she didn't know she needed. A thread beginning its first stitch back through a tear she didn't

know was open.

She dropped her head against his shoulder.

The didn't speak for a moment. They simply sat, alone, with each other. Much as they had so many times. Much as they hadn't for so so long.

"I would have helped you in hiding," he said finally, his voice thick. "I would've been a shit about it, but I would've helped you. You're right, I don't know how to fight those assholes once they crack into your head."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," she said, feeling every word like a heavy weight. "It was stupid."

He chuckled, "Yeah... it was definitely stupid."

El smiled, a lovely and bittersweet nostalgia washing over her as their word reappeared between them.

Her eyes gazed mindlessly forward as she soaked the moment in, until a glitter of gold on his left hand caught her attention.

El simply reached out and tapped against the ring with her finger as she looked up at him.

"Oh, yeah," he replied awkwardly as he lifted his hand and fingered the ring, the smile on his face finally reaching his eyes. "You finally got your wish."

"I *told* you," she said emphatically and she rammed her shoulder into him playfully. "I told you Joyce was in love with you but you would never listen to me."

He laughed, the most adorable pink flush gracing his rugged cheeks as he looked away, "Yeah, yeah. You can say you told me so."

"I told you so," she replied, her smile suddenly so big it almost hurt as she reached forward and picked up her food again. She glanced back to him, warmed by the silent smile on his face.

"You're happy, aren't you?" she asked knowingly.

"Closest I've been in a long time," he replied, peeking up at her for a quick second before focusing back on his dinner.

They sat for a moment in silence before Hopper broke the moment once again.

"What about Mike?" he asked as he nodded toward the kitchen. "Am I going to have to deal with you two as a package deal again?"

El looked away, the curve of her lip betraying her thoughts as she poked at her food. "I think so, yeah."

"Good," he replied with a nod, his response catching her off guard.

"You like him now, don't you?" she asked as she leaned back in the couch.

"I never *didn't* like him," Hopper sighed, "But yeah, he grew on me over the years."

El smirked into her take out box.

"He was insufferable, by the way," he added. "No man on the face of this Earth has ever been more dedicated to a girl than he was to finding you. He's a good kid."

"He told me you taught him how to shoot?"

"Oh yeah," Hopper replied with a chuckle as he leaned back, something about his demeanor changing and relaxing into innocuous conversation. "That was an experience. Took him three months to even stop shaking with the gun in his hand, but he got the hang of it after awhile. A *long* while. He ended up being a pretty good shot, which was a fucking shocker to me. Much less of a dweeb than he was when you were around."

"I noticed," she said with a smirk. "I kind of liked that dweeb though."

"Believe me, you made that obvious. I still have a limp from where you rammed a couch into my leg when I wouldn't let you see him."

He joked as he shook his head and looked at her.

El chuckled, "You do not."

Hopper simply shrugged.

El was quiet when she next spoke. "He saved my life. I'm honestly only sitting here because of him. We got ambushed earlier this week."

Hopper looked up in surprise. It was clear Mike had not filled him in on any of the details. "How'd he manage that?"

"With his hacking. He was able to warn me through the Void. Just in time. Full SWAT team." She replied, a small shudder running down her back as she thought about it.

"Shit" Hopper replied in surprise. "Well, I'm glad to hear his nerdy super power is coming in handy. The kid's too smart for his own good."

"He is," she agreed.

"SWAT? They pulled out the big guns on you. What are we up against here? So it's Kali.. Kali right? And the new girl. The little one? They're in a lab?" His voice took on his trademark Chief of Police tone as he placed the now empty carton on the table and turned to her.

El nodded. "Kali and I broke Sev... seventeen... out a few weeks back. Really, she broke herself out. I'm still not sure how she did it. They got taken last night. Mike's apartment got completely wrecked. I know where they are. Mike has maps and security access through their... servers? I've got to get them back."

"That all you need to do?" he asked, an unspoken question in his tone.

El flinched.

She wasn't sure how he knew. Maybe Mike had told him? Or maybe he'd just put two and two together himself.

But she didn't want to talk about it.

She had never killed on purpose before, with cold calculating premeditation. Every other kill she had under her belt had been completely under self defense. With Kali by her side, she'd been able to frame the plan in a way that was easy to swallow. But now, sitting next to her father, it all felt painful to admit. The fact that she was even considering it made her feel sick.

"I have some Projects to... end," she said vaguely. "Three of them."

"And a certain white haired piece of shit whose name we don't speak?" he added, looking at her through the side of his eye.

"Ideally, yes." She replied coldly after a pause.

Her Dad sighed, clearly torn by her admission of her plan. She ventured to look at him.

"I will be in hiding for the rest of my life if I don't end it," she stated clearly in defense of her motives. "And without Kali, the chances of them finding me are really high. She could block their search. I can't. I don't want to do this, but I don't have a choice."

Hopper nodded, taking in the information as though it was a police report. Her heartbeat began to race as they sat in silence.

"Will he be there?" he asked.

El nodded, knowing without hesitation who *he* was.

His face rose through her mind as she thought about her plans with a clarity she didn't regularly experience.

What followed was a queasy inkling at the back of her mind, bringing her attention to the kernel of herself, miniscule but present, that still held care for the man who had raised her for the first eleven years of her life. It made her feel sick to feel it. She wanted to root through her body until she found where the feeling lived and manually remove it like a tumor. The fact that a part of her, any single cell in her body, carried love for him made her feel so weak.

It was why she was so resolutely scared to see him.

She didn't know if she could do it.

"It's the only way?" her Dad asked, his voice clear as his eyes returned to her.

El nodded coldly.

"Well..." he said as he exhaled. "I won't get in your way. If that's what you need to do. But I'm here to help you get your sisters back. I will help you get that little girl out of there. We'll be able to keep her safe." He said, clear in his boundaries.

She looked up and blinked back tears. It was so much more than she could ever ask from him.

A vision of him and Joyce keeping Sev safe in the way they had her populated her brain in an instant and beautiful way.

El sniffed. "She's more powerful than me."

"How the hell is that possible?" he replied, his eyes narrowing in disbelief. "I watched you close a damned gate to another dimension."

El shrugged. "She turned me off. Like, she found a switch in the back of my head and she froze me out from my own powers."

"Shit." He said, his eyes wide.

"And I don't even know what else she can do," El replied. "She's a good kid, though."

Hopper nodded. "We'll get her out." He replied before he was cut off by a yawn.

"You should sleep. Take the bedroom," she said as she patted him on the shoulder. "You drove too long."

"Nah, I can sleep here, you can take the bedroom," he replied, making her roll her eyes.

"No. I'd rather die than sleep in Mike's ex-girlfriend's bed," El replied darkly.

Hopper snorted suddenly, "That's who's place this is?"

El nodded as she rolled her eyes.

"Wheeler!" he yelled as he stood up and stretched, "You have shitty taste in hideouts."

Mike showed up in the doorway to the kitchen almost instantly, as though he'd been lurking right around the corner. His features were still clearly tied up in nerves. "I didn't have any other options," he bit back defensively.

"Don't think we're done talking about how you lied to me, by the way," Hopper replied, his voice quickly turning threatening as he crossed through the room and peeked into the bedroom off of the right.

"A *YEAR*, Hopper," Mike retorted darkly as he crossed into the living room. "You can survive with four days."

"How much longer are you going to beat that dead horse, kid?" Hopper replied as he rolled his eyes.

She should have felt any sensation other than the one that was coursing through her, but she couldn't stop the gleeful nostalgia the size of the universe that was pressed tight through her veins, causing every ping pong of their argument to seem like the most amazing, funniest, glorious thing.

"I'm about to fall asleep on my feet. Let me get a couple hours of shut eye and then we'll dive in and make a plan," Hopper said as he rubbed his eyes. He looked up to El one last time.

"You better be here when I wake up," he threatened.

El smiled, "I promise I'll be here when you wake up."

"Good enough," he replied before disappearing through the bedroom doorway.



El smiled to herself once he was gone, but she didn't get a chance to think because Mike was instantly in front of her, kneeled down at the base of where she sat. His expression still tight and nervous.

"Are you okay?" he asked hesitantly.

"You called him." She stated simply. "Even though I asked you not to."

"Listen, El," he started, his hands in the air in surrender, his words flying out in a defensive stutter. He had clearly been worked up for hours with no relief, "Technically, I promised *him* first. Plus, we- we don't have a lot of options. You gotta know that, right? I mean, it's not just you. We have Sev to think about and – and Kali. I know you asked me not to tell him but do you - do you know anyone else we can call? We're kind of fucked without them. And they really want to be here. You can't expect us to – "

"Mike," she interjected, touching his arm to stop his ramble. "Slow down."

Mike softened slightly, his expression turning sheepish as he fell silent. He swallowed, his shoulders tight as though he was braced for impact.

"Are you mad?" he asked quietly, his voice laced with a slight desperation.

El sighed.

It was a valid question.

She looked out at the streetlights playing through the dark window as she mulled it over.

She hadn't really had any chance to *think* about about she felt.

On the one hand, their presence made so many hundreds of decisions in her life all feel so ridiculously futile. She had left Hawkins specifically to shield them from the impact of what they had just stepped directly back into.

But, just like Mike, she hadn't asked any of them to come. They were

all here of their own volition. Because of her, which resulted in a blazingly warm sensation in the corners of her heart where her fear didn't reside.

Though she didn't want to admit it... she knew she needed them right now. Badly. Mike was right, she had her sisters to think about.

And more than anything, the pulsating fullness of her heart that resulted from an hour with her father was a better feeling than anything in the world.

El shook her head as she left her thoughts and returned to Mike. "I'm not mad. But you're an idiot. You should have asked me first."

"Yeah, I should have," he exhaled apprehensively. "That way you wouldn't have blown my cover. He's going to murder me in my sleep now," he said as he side eyed the bedroom door like he had a bullseye on his forehead.

"From the sound of it you had almost no cover at all," she replied mockingly. "You're a terrible liar."

"That's not true. Just with him," he replied.

"All the same. Just... no more surprises, okay?" she requested as she leaned forward closer to him.

Mike nodded quickly, his expression relieved as he seemed to sense her closeness. His voice dropped to a whisper as he too leaned in, his elbow dropping to her thigh. "This is it. I promise. Just think of me bringing your dad as a... like a Christmas present."

El smiled and rolled her eyes as she worked herself to her feet and took a step to cross toward the kitchen. "Oh yes, my dad killing my boyfriend in his sleep is a great Christmas present, thank you."

She only got one step before a hand was on her wrist, tugging her back around.

He was back on his feet, directly in front of her as he held her firmly in his grasp, so much so that she had to arch up to meet his eye. A light flush had entered his cheeks in the split second since she had

looked away. A hesitant smile was hovering on his lips. His eyes were glowing with held back intensity.

"What?" she asked, slightly breathless by the way he was suddenly looking at her.

"Your boyfriend?"

"Oh..." she replied, only realizing her words when he repeated them back to her. She exhaled a self conscious laugh.

The question was immediate and heavy in the air between them. It seemed so silly to feel the butterflies that coursed through her stomach as she looked up at him and felt the expectant warmth that he emanated for her. After all they'd been through in the last few days, she didn't expect that her mind was able to feel so suddenly light.

It was Mike. It was the miraculous affect he had on her. An effect she never wanted to be without again. It made her answer to his question as easy as breathing.

"...Yes?" she finally replied, her thoughts tugging up against the corner of her lip.

Mike blinked and took a deep exhale before his face broke out into a cracking smile. He ran his thumb against her wrist as he leaned in yet more closely against her.

"I thought I might have ruined everything with that phone call," he admitted, his voice sheepish, "Thank you. This is... way better."

Mike leaned down and softly caught her lips.

The whole hour coalesced as he kissed her. The care that existed inside of the walls around her. Despite it all, her heart was exuberant. It wouldn't last, but she allowed herself to fully feel the moment.

She rose higher on her tip toes to deepen the kiss, her hand finding its way into the tendrils of his hair at the nape of his neck. He exhaled against her lips as his arm wrapped around her waist and pulled her in tighter in reply.

"Do you have – Oh, Jesus Christ, you two haven't changed at all. I'm getting too old for this."

Mike and El jumped apart instantly, their faces both darting to her left to find her Dad standing in the bedroom doorway, shaking his head as he crossed into the kitchen.

"You two wasted no time..." he mumbled as he disappeared into the kitchen.

El broke out into bizarre fit of giggles against Mike's chest.

It all felt so insanely surreal.

Mike groaned and dropped his forehead to hers dejectedly. "I spent years getting that man on my good side. You're back for one hour and he's back to scaring the hell out of me."

El leaned up and touched her lips to his quickly, the smile on her lips uncontainable. "Don't worry, I'll protect you." She teased.

"Alright, lovebirds. Where am I sleeping?" Steve's voice entered the fray. Mike looked around and sighed.

"Right," he thought for a second. El could almost see the gears turning behind his eyes before he looked down at her. "You up for breaking into another apartment?" he asked.

She rolled her eyes. "Is this what we do now?"

"Maybe. We could save a lot of rent if we just live like this forever?"

El laughed. He smiled sardonically in reply. "The neighbor on the third floor is pretty cool and I know they're in California for Christmas."

El nodded and removed herself from Mike's grip as she turned to grab her bag, "I will happily do anything to not have to sleep another night in your ex-girlfriend's apartment. Breaking into another one sounds great."

"Whoa, wait. What?" Steve interjected as he crossed to the couch.

"That's who's all over the fridge?"

Mike groaned. "Yes."

"Oh.. I thought they were El. Damn, Dustin wasn't lying," Steve said quietly as he stood next to Mike, but not too quietly so El couldn't hear him. "*El Clone*' is right. That's messed up, Wheeler. *And you brought her here?*"

"I didn't have any other choice," Mike hissed, clearly sick of this line of questioning.

"A dumpster would have been a better idea, kid," Steve exclaimed. "I'm surprise you're still alive. Did I teach you nothing about women?"

"No, you didn't," Mike scoffed. "What the hell are you talking about? And don't call me 'kid', Harrington. I'm taller than you."

Steve laughed and brushed him off as he unzipped his jacket and began to get ready to sleep, "Yeah, okay kid."

El's eyes, as if on reflex, gravitated to the wall that has caused her so much pain the night before only to find that the corkboard was now missing. She smiled gratefully.

"You ready?" Mike asked, his arm slipping back around her waist, his own backpack in his hand.

She nodded.

"Dad, we're going to take an apartment upstairs," she called toward the bathroom.

"No funny business!" a voice boomed in reply.

El's heart fully exploded on impact.

"Oh my God, can we please leave?" Mike grumbled.

She nodded and followed him out the door, the smile on her face inextinguishable.

In a few hours her life was going to return to pitch black intensity, but for the moment the buoyancy in her heart was so unexpectedly high. She had to find her sisters. She had to end this once and for all. But the cushion of support made her feel, in a way she never could have anticipated, like maybe, just maybe, she was up for the challenge.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Bear with me as we reach the final stretch of this story. I'm currently traveling for the next five weeks, and while I only want to work on this, I feel like I need to pay attention to the awesome trip I had booked before this story took over my brain two months ago. I hope to update once a week, but it might be up to a week and a half between updates until the end. I love writing this so I'm doing my best.

As always, THANK YOU for your comments and engagement and your eyes reading all of this. I've been having a blast with each of you.

Until next time!

- L -

## 17. Chapter 17

Mike stood by the edge of the bed, freshly showered, dressed in clothing stolen from the bedroom closet of the latest string of apartments they'd broken into. His chest was tight with nerves at the idea of waking her. She looked so peaceful.

The last thing he wanted to do was be the reason why, yet again, her face distorted into anxious fear the second she remembered the stress she was under, as it had every time she'd awoken since her sisters had been taken.

The softened light of Christmas morning filtered into the room through thick blue curtains. The dim hue drifting over her face was not enough to wake her. Yet, it was just bright enough for him to see her features in soft light. She was curled up with a pillow hugged against her chest, the long arms of her sweater pulled over her fingers in the cold morning air. Her chestnut curls splayed out against the bed as though she had been hit by a gust of wind. Her face was devoid of any of the lines of panic that had owned her expressions for the last day and a half.

She looked so stunningly perfect.

He wished he could let her stay like that forever. He wished he could carefully remove the pillow from her arms and replace his own body into that space. To hold El Hopper peacefully on Christmas morning sounded like the most wonderful dream come true.

But that was not in the cards. The girls had been gone for two nights now. They had work to do.

Mike crawled carefully on his hands and knees into the center of the bed, deciding the least he could do was wake her as gently as possible. Lifting his hand, he brushed a curl from her cheek. "El... it's time to get up."

El's eyes did not open, but she stirred ever so slightly.

"Mike...?" she breathed. Her voice was faint and jumbled as it had

been a few nights prior when she'd pulled him into the bed while fast asleep.

"Yeah, it's me."

The smallest smile traced across the corner of her lips.

"...s'gooddream..." she mumbled lazily, her words so quiet that he almost missed them as she pushed her head deeper into her pillow.

Mike bit his lip as his heart grew painfully in his chest.

His resolve was shit. Before he knew it he was giving into his previous urge. He eased the pillow from her grip and slid in beside her, pulling himself close to her as delicately as possible so as not to wake her. She nuzzled against him, all soft curves and light breaths, and for that moment Mike was somehow able to truly convince himself that all was right in the world. El Hopper was peacefully in his arms on Christmas morning, just as she always should have been. And maybe, just maybe, they weren't mere steps away from one of the most dangerous moments in either of their lives.

Mike stayed there with his nose pressed into her hair. He let his mind drift on the scent of her. He was just beginning to fully grasp that she was back, and even more so, that *she was his again*. And with it, his mind yet again spun out of control, as it had in so many quiet moments over the last week. He had been revisiting all of the dreams they had once shared, as well as some of the dreams he had secretly stashed away with her in the back of his mind. Full futures, totally written. Once fiction. Now blissfully possible outcomes.

He knew he should be keeping a level head and taking things a day at a time, but... he couldn't, and in that moment he didn't try to stop the dizzying spin of possibilities that he saw with her.

Mike smiled softly as he placed an air light kiss against her forehead.

She was right, this was a good dream.

Of course, like every dream, it didn't last. But when El awoke, it wasn't with a scream or a gasp.



"Mike..." she mumbled, her fingers bunching into his shirt as she shook him lightly, "We need to wake up."

"I know..." he replied with a light gasp, surprised to find that he had fallen back asleep.

El did not pull at him again, however. Instead, she buried herself deeper into his chest and sighed. "Don't want to..." she groaned.

Mike chuckled. "We have to, El. It's Christmas." His fingers found their way into her hair as he lazily spoke. "Your dad is downstairs waiting for us with presents like semi automatic rifles and lab plans and Steve Harrington."

El giggled against him. "Dark humor, Wheeler."

"I know it's exactly what you wanted for Christmas."

"Nah..." she replied as she snaked up his side and placed a sleepy kiss against his cheek, "You're what I wanted for Christmas."

Mike blushed in surprise as he fought to contain the involuntarily smile taking over his face. "You're a softie, Hopper..." he breathed slowly in a teasing tone as his arms tightened around her. He flipped them both to his side so he could face her, burying his own head against hers as his cheeks flamed. "And um... Yeah..." he stuttered lamely. "You're kinda what I wanted for Christmas, too."

El giggled as she poked him in the ribs, "Now who's the softie?"

"Still you," he replied slyly as he opened his eyes and caught her gaze.

Mike stopped short as he realized that her sweet smile was not reaching her eyes. She looked back at him as though she'd been caught in a lie, her grin slowly dimming.

"Hey," she replied after a moment, her tone shifting to something that matched her real mood, beneath the surface of their early morning banter.

Mike didn't reply, and El didn't elaborate. They didn't really need to.

Everything they felt was apparent in the air between them as the momentary fluffy bubble they had tried to hide inside of burst.

"We'll do Christmas for real next year. I promise." He finally whispered, a tiny hopeful window to the future still open in his mind.

El didn't smile at that, however. Instead, something tight appeared at the back of her eyes before she looked away completely, let out a heavy sigh, and laid back against his shoulder.

"What do you need to do today?" she asked, her tone shifting to something neutral as she quickly changed the subject.

"Well," he started, deciding to shake off his surprise at the shift and answer her question. "The main thing I need to do is find a strong enough internet connection to hack into the system. The one here is trash. And then I need to do some work in there to see what we can find."

"You just need a stronger signal?" she asked, something incredulous in her voice as she looked back over to him, the light coming ever so slightly back into her eyes. "I can do that."

"Oh... oh!"

Mike gaped like an idiot. In that moment any of his minimal worry at her change in mood was eclipsed by a quick rush of nerdy awe. "You can boost an internet signal?"

"I've never tried," she said with a shrug. "But how hard can it be? If it's anything like radio or electricity?"

"Cool..." he breathed, instantly embarrassed by the unmasked tone of complete fascination and awe that had just escaped him. "Sorry, that is just... that would be really cool."

And oh boy, was it.

El and Mike quickly made it down to the other apartment and set out to give it a try, El easily boosted the signal as she sat next to him, her eyes closed in a meditative state as she channeled. He moved as quickly as he could, mind blown by the speed of the connection she

was able to create, and with a sweep of excitement he was able to locate a couple of very important tools needed for their plan.

"That was easy," she said when he called her back out of her channeling. She touched her nose to find no trace of blood. "It's a cleaner connection to work with than radio waves."

Mike had absolutely no idea what she meant by that, but the fact that she could even say something that awesome excited him to no end.

The ability to partner with El to do exactly what needed to be done was a huge boost to his morale, and with it, the first couple hours of planning went infinitely better than he'd expected.

Hopper had mercifully not decided to kill him in his sleep, and he'd only given Mike moderate levels of shit throughout the day. And somehow, though Mike couldn't understand how, Steve wasn't driving him completely insane. Only slightly. It must have been the Christmas spirit.

El, on the other hand, was getting more and more agitated with each hour that passed. It made sense. With each hour that passed another two hours were added to the final moment that they planned to enter the lab, until they finally settled on 9pm the following night.

"...It's the best time because we know from the schedules that Brenner will be there," Mike said, careful to stick to the facts so that he could help El see that waiting was the best option, "and it's right at a shift change, so if we fuck with the security system and hack the timer, we can cut the security inside by a significant amount of men. Also, the security system is fully programmable from here, so I can put the place on lock down at a specific time, which means outside troops won't be able to get in easily if they try to call them."

El was jittery beside him, clearly uncomfortable with the wait but not fighting him verbally. He placed his hand lightly on her knee.

"I know it sucks," he said quietly as he leaned toward her, "But it's better that we do this right than we do this fast. It's already mid day and we're all worked up and we haven't gotten any chance to do any real planning yet."

"Fine," she said after a pause, her shoulders sagging as she leaned against the table. "We go tomorrow. I don't know how I'm going to sleep tonight, but I get it."

"Thanks, kid." Hopper replied as he mussed her hair. She shot him an annoyed glance, but smiled slightly as she looked back down at her hands. "Next up," Hopper said, "Got any idea where the girls might be in here? Either of you?"

Hopper pointed to the map that Mike had printed from his hard drive, spread out on the table and taped together in order to see it in full view.

El dropped her finger against the right side. "Kali thinks they would have been in this row of rooms," she said, tracing the hallway off of the center lab space. "But... I don't know where they would keep Kali, or if they'd put Sev back into her original room."

"Could they be in the lab space?" Mike asked, his finger crossing over hers to point to the large open space in the center of the building.

"Maybe. I'll need to look there at least."

"Okay, so here's what we're going to do," Hopper cut in as she leaned back and lit himself a cigarette. "We're going to have a lot of ground to cover. So El, you and I are to go straight to the lab space, since I bet that will have the strongest security. I'll be your backup." He said, his finger tracing the center of the map. El nodded in agreement. "Steve and Mike will be going down this hallway to -"

"Mike?" El's voice echoed suddenly. Her whole body tensed beside him, making Mike look up in surprise. "Mike's not going in."

"Yes I am," he said instinctively. "Of course I am."

El whipped around and looked at him in shock.

"No. You're not." she said simply as she turned back to her father. "Isn't that why you brought Steve? For backup? So only professionals went in there? What do you mean Mike's going in? That's crazy."

"Hey!" Mike exclaimed defensively, "I -"

Hopper held his hand up to interject carefully. "Mike's gotta go in, kid. Your sister's need another familiar face and we need the manpower. It doesn't work any other way."

El stared at her dad, her mouth agape, before she turned back to Mike. Something was dancing in her gaze that he had never seen before. A frantic helplessness that seemed so entirely unrelated to the woman he knew beside him.

He couldn't make sense of it.

"Kid, we need him." Hopper repeated softly.

El's eyes shot back to her dad. Her voice rose, colder this time. "No."

"Okay, why don't we take a break? I could use some coffee," Hopper said as he stood up and crossed to the pot, busying himself with simple actions to give El a moment.

"Yeah, I'll be right back," Steve added quickly, slipping out from behind Mike's chair and disappearing into the bathroom in a clear attempt to get as far away from Mike and El's tension as possible.

El did not look at Mike once they were alone, but rather, kept her gaze firmly on the table.

"El," Mike said carefully. "It'll be fine. I can do it. Plus, I need to get into their computer systems onsite if we really want to put an end to all of this. You need me in there."

El finally looked up, her honey eyes glazed over with tears.

"No..." she finally replied.

But this time it was not a command.

It was a plead.

And it shattered his heart.

He knew exactly how she felt. He'd felt that way every day for a decade, and he'd long ago accepted that to love her meant feeling

that fear as a constant companion. A constant fear that he could lose her at any juncture. Hell, he had already lost her twice.

All fight left him.

"You know I can handle myself," he said softly. "And I won't be alone."

El bit her lip as she locked eyes with him, a painful acceptance washing over her features. "You stay with Steve, you get the girls, and you get out." She said after a long pause, her voice shaky. "Even if I'm not done. Promise me that."

Mike gaped at her. "I... I can't promise you that."

"Mike - " she begged.

"- No. You wouldn't promise me that you'd leave if I was in danger. Don't make me promise you that," he said emphatically, instantly cursing himself as he heard the edge in this voice.

El stared at him in a silent standoff, her silence a clear indication that Mike was right in what he'd said. But it brought him no solace, because in that moment he saw something crack in her eyes. She looked suddenly terrified. Defeated.

Slowly, she looked away from him and down at her hands, her breath starting to hitch as the two other men then returned to the table, interrupting their intimate disagreement.

Moment by moment he could feel her walling off, like a connection between them was being cut. A thick tension was building in its place. Hopper began talking again, laying plans for their two separate teams. All the while, El remained quiet, her eyes still firmly on her hands. She grunted replies when her father would ask her a question, but she was a million miles away.

Mike did his best to keep his thoughts on the topic at hand, but he was failing miserably. He tried to console her silently, placing his hand on her knee and rubbing light circles there, but she didn't respond in any way whatsoever.

And as he touched her, it only made it worse for him. Because somehow her pain reflected back onto his, compounding it. Building it to a level so palpable he felt like he might choke. He had a hard time hearing Hopper as he contended with the true reality of what tomorrow could entail. His thoughts broken only as El rose from the table and left the kitchen.

"El...?" Mike asked as he watched her leave the room, jumping to his feet as he heard the apartment door open and close.

A firm hand clapped down on his shoulder.

"Let her go, kid. She didn't leave. You know she's just upstairs." Hopper said in the softest voice a man like him could make. "You weren't ever any good at this, what with how clingy you are, but that girl needs to be alone when she's like this. Just give her some time."

"I don't get *clingy*," Mike bit back in irritation.

Hopper snorted and rolled his eyes, but it was Steve's voice who replied. "Bullshit. The very first thing I even knew about Ellie was that you'd called her every night for a year without even knowing that she was listening."

"It wasn't a year!" Mike retorted immediately. "It was just 353 days."

"Oh my God, Wheeler! Can you hear yourself? Hopper's right. Give the girl some space. She'll be fine. She just needs some air." Steve said as he propped his feet up on El's now empty chair. "In the meantime, make a plan with me about how we're going to find that little girl, because whether I like being stuck with you or not, that's what's happening."

Mike looked with great annoyance between the two men, a magnetic sensation pulling him to leave and follow her, but the presence of Hopper's firm hand still on his shoulder served as a realization that the man was probably right.

It got easier as the hours passed and they prepared their plans, and their plan Bs and Cs and Ds, and while Hopper took him through a quick tutorial on the ins and outs of the insane rifles he had brought,

which Mike recognized from the Hawkins National Laboratory. It all served to distract him until after the sun had set, at least a bit. But it hadn't stopped his leg from bouncing nervously throughout the hours. It hadn't stopped his heartbeat from being just a smidge too fast. And it was getting worse the longer they went on.

Finally, it was Hopper that gave him the out. "Your fidgeting is driving me crazy, Wheeler. Go check on her. We can pick this back up in the morning."

Mike didn't even reply. He simply shot up and bolted out of the door like a dog let off of a leash.

He needed to see her. He needed to look her in the eye and make her understand why he had to do this. He needed her to be okay.

Mike bounded up the staircase two steps at a time before entering the second apartment, but she was nowhere to be found. She wasn't in the bed. She wasn't in the living room or the kitchen. His heart began to race as he frantically rushed back to the bedroom to make sure her backpack was still here, breathing a sigh of relief as he saw that it was.

The bathroom door was closed.

He took a moment to calm his breathing, feeling like a bit of an idiot for his panicked reaction. Then he slowly crossed, leaned against the doorsill and raised his hand to knock. But he hesitated.

Maybe he should wait. Maybe he should –

Mike jumped as the door opened and El, wrapped in a towel, her hair splayed wet against her shoulders, almost ran directly into his chest as she attempted to step out. She looked up in surprise.

Mike's breath caught at the sight of her.

The walls were completely gone from her eyes.

Something long lost woke up inside of him as she stared at him with the crystal clear vulnerability of the young girl she'd once known.



In that moment all the plans, the disagreements, the tension, and the mundane little bits faded away.

All there was was her.

And he simply knew, with a sudden melancholic rush of love for her, that they were of one mind.

---

It was all so unfair.

El caught her own eyes in the reflection as she wiped the steam from the mirror. She looked as pained as she felt. Her tears were silent as she watched them mix with the drops of shower water on her face. They did not wrack her. They simply fell slowly against her cheeks.

He could be gone tomorrow.

She could be gone tomorrow.

It had only been five days... Five days of being able to see his smile again. Five days of being able to drown in his dark eyes...

It was so incredibly unfair.

There were too many hours left for her to think, too many hours for her brain to populate the panicked corners of her mind with every terrible thing that could happen to him. It was a uniquely dark kind of torture.

It wasn't that she'd been naive. She'd known in some way for two days that this was how it might shake out, but once Steve and her dad had arrived, she'd put Mike's participation as far out of her mind as possible, in hopes that Mike would go back to the original plan of staying behind and manning the computer.

Of course that hadn't happened. Of course this was the choice he would make.

A small sad smile quivered on her lips at the thought. Of course he would. He had always been so willing to walk into the fire for her, no matter the risk. It had been true from the very first moment she'd met

him.

The other boys had fought with him that first night. In hushed whispers in the cold rain they had begged him to move on and leave her. They'd been looking for Will, after all. Not some random girl wandering through the woods.

But Mike? Mike didn't take his eyes off of her once in those first moments. She would never forget it, because in his eyes she saw something she had never seen before. Something she only found a word for many years later, in a silly fantasy book that Dottie had found in box on the side of the road in Canada.

Gallant. Fully willing to be at her service.

The only difference was that now he was fully capable of actually doing it.

It was *his* choice, she reminded herself yet again, and she had to give him that, no matter how much it broke her heart.

El wiped her face, removing the tears and the steam alike, and dried herself from the respite that had been a long hot shower. She wrapped the towel around her, pinning it into the crook of her arm as she opened the door.

She stopped short to find Mike standing at the door, his arm propped up against the sill, towering over her, his hand fisted in preparation for a knock.

Their eyes locked in surprise, neither of them expecting the instant interaction. His gaze was sorrowful yet resilient. The look of a man who had made up his mind.

She couldn't look away from his face. From the man she couldn't protect anymore. The man who was willing to drop everything in his life to fight for her.

The man who, though he had never said it, she knew was willing to die for her...

And in that moment, at that full realization, something gave way

inside of her. Reins she had been holding on her emotions were dropped to the ground.

And Mike replied, telling her it was okay, with nothing more than a look in his eyes.

El felt a spark somewhere deep inside of her as something so special and sacred returned into the air between them. Faded over years, but back in an instant.

She had completely forgotten what it felt like when he read the deepest parts of her without words.

El suddenly felt as transparent as glass. Every ounce of her on display. Her fear. Her pain. Her love for him. And she could feel every ebb of his emotions in return.

It was everything. All at once.

*It was exactly them.*

...It could all be gone tomorrow.

...But at least she had tonight...

She leaned up into him like a moth to a flame and he met her halfway, falling together in a kiss so delicate that it left her breathless. A heady buzz traced down her body, warming her despite the chilly night air against her skin.

El slowly slipped her fingers within his, and in return, he began to guide her as he stepped backwards. Her lips caressed softly against his as they moved. Each tiny motion they made against each other caused a flurry of sparks beneath her skin. Mike stopped as his calves contacted the bed. His lips left hers and she felt him sigh as he sat on the bed and his forehead dropped to her chest. His fingers left her hands and his arms wrapped firmly around her waist, his hands spreading across her back in an all encompassing embrace.

El exhaled heavily as her arms found their way around his neck, caressing lightly against his shoulders as she held him to her.

To be with him like this, with no walls left between them, felt like the most special thing in the world.

Mike arched his lips up from her chest and pressed against her collar bone, moving with a newly heated intensity against her skin. Her fingers tensed into the back of his hair in reply. His lips trailed down her body slowly, inch by inch, causing her to shiver with each new touch, until his hands softly tugged against her towel, and the cloth easily fell to the floor.

Mike took full control at that, his hands running up the small of her back as he guided her with care down to the mattress and rolled over with her onto the bed.

El pulled him deeper into the bed, her fingernails digging into his shirt eagerly as she worked to free him of it, quickly seeking to taste his lips once it was gone. He sighed against her, his whole body responding to her as her hands ran against his shoulders, his back, his arms, his neck, every inch of him that she could touch. There was never going to be enough.

With a quick motion that made her jump, Mike's hands sought hers, twisting his fingers tightly through her grip as he pulled away from her kiss and looked down on her, his breath heavy, the dark pools of his eyes glittering for her in a silent request of consent.

She did not need to speak. He could read the answer in her eyes.

Whatever was to come next, whether they only had this one single night left together, or a lifetime, she just felt so incredibly grateful to have him, now, for this moment of their lives. So grateful for the heat of Mike's skin against hers. For the soft scratch of his facial hair against her chest as he kicked off his remaining clothing. For his hands that cradled her like she was the most special thing in his world as he moved against her. For his body, which brought hers slowly and intensely to a state she had so rarely felt, making her eyes roll back as her body bucked against him, out of her control, safe in his arms.

Mike's head fell into the crook of El's shoulder in the afterglow, his breath heaving and mixing with hers, tickling in a glorious flutter

against her neck. El's fingers found their way into his hair, now glossy with sweat.

"I love you," he breathed suddenly against her ear, his voice shaky as his arms wrapped a tight circle around her, holding her for dear life. "I can't believe I can say that to you again. God, El, I love you."

El felt a soft sound exit her lips in reply as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and held him, her chin against his forehead, her toes grazing his shins.

"I love you, too," she breathed. His arm tightened around her waist in reply as his face buried deeper into her.

El stared off blankly into the dim room, unfallen tears glazing her eyes, for the following minutes as she held Mike in silence, every nerve in her body working to memorize what it felt like to hold him in this perfect moment, the tenuousness palpable to her like a dream that was about to fade away.

"El?" Mike's voice muffled against her neck.

"Yes?"

"Um..."

Mike shifted in her arms and propped himself up on his elbow so he could look down on her. His face was soft. His hair was falling in messy tendrils across his forehead. His voice was tentative, almost nervous, as he spoke. "I was thinking. Once all this is over... maybe we could, I don't know, go somewhere? Just... like... the two of us." His words began to spill from his lips in a jumble as his expressions became animated, "I know there's a lot of details we'd have to work out with Sev and your sister and tying up loose ends but... I mean. *I* can live almost anywhere," he said with a disarmed shrug as he sought for something in her eyes. "I don't know... we could go to, maybe... California, or something like that?"

"California?"

"I mean, yeah?" His expression was becoming awkward and tense as he continued. "It doesn't have to be California if you, you know, want

to think about other places. That'd be great too. Whatever you want. I just... I heard it's beautiful there and there's mountains and the ocean and there's tons of work there for me in San Francisco, so we could... well, you know, we could... start fresh?" he asked as he bit his lip. "If – if you wanted to?"

El's breath caught as she finally grasped the scope of what he was trying to ask. A sensational shiver traced down her entire body.

Followed by a tight cold grip of fear around her heart.

Mike's brow furrowed nervously as a twinge of embarrassment shadowed across his eyes. "Sorry, was that too much?"

"No," she breathed instantly, her eyes wide as she looked at him in the dim light.

"Okay..." Mike replied, his expression expectant for a true response. But though she tried to move her mouth, she couldn't give him one. Her voice was caught in her throat, lacing with compounding fear.

"It's just...um..." he stumbled. "This could all be over for you tomorrow and then you'll be free of this and... I don't know..." he took in her gaze and El cringed as she knew he could read the fear in her eyes. She watched him deflate. "It's stupid... sorry."

"No!" she exclaimed, her body shaking as she tried to console him. "I just... I don't... How... how do you think about the future with... with everything tomorrow...?"

Mike was kind in how well he handled her inadequate response. He was quiet for a moment as he ruminated on her question. "I guess I can only handle tomorrow *if* I think about the future." He said, his voice quiet. "So I have something to push through for."

"Oh..." she breathed lamely.

His way of thinking felt... dangerous. And her heart sank as she realized she had given up that way of thinking years ago, a cynical darkness taking over her dreams after so many years of living in a perpetual state of simply trying to get to the next day.

But as she looked at Mike, with his bitten lip and his nervous eyes, with his hopeful question still in the air between them, she couldn't deny that his way of dealing with all of this was... beautiful.

And so, with a shiver of fear for what came next, she dipped in her smallest toe.

"What's... San Francisco like?" she asked tentatively.

"I don't know, actually," he replied, his voice unsteady. "I haven't been there. But I know that you don't need a car. Most people bike or bus or take the train. There's a lot of computer work, everything's happening there. It's not a huge city, but it's compact. Like a mini New York. What would..." he stopped, carefully seeking permission in her eyes before he continued. "What would you want to do?"

El was quiet for a moment as another wave of tightness clamped around her chest. She felt embarrassed at how incredibly vulnerable such a simple question made her feel. It was a question she expressly never asked herself... though she knew the answer without a second's hesitation. The answer had always been there, lying in wait.

Though so simple, the words felt rebellious on her lips. "I just want to go back to school," she said quietly. "I don't care where, I guess. I just want to finish high school. Then maybe... college? I don't..." she shrugged dejectedly, feeling a lump growing in her throat. "Sorry, I don't let myself think about this."

"Why?" he asked innocently.

"Because it hurts."

The simple honesty of her own words made tears creep into her eyes.

Something seemed to dawn on Mike as she said that, and his expression, which had been so tight, relaxed into understanding. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be, please." she said sadly, feeling wholly inadequate.

"No, I get it. I do," he said, his voice softer as he grasped the reasons behind her response. "I'm sorry. You're just... you're just finally here

so I can share this stuff with you again, you know? We always talked about where we'd go and what we'd do and I just... I guess I just kept having these conversations after you left, but... with myself? So yeah, I guess I'm a few steps ahead. I can see if that's maybe a little overwhelming."

"Wait.." El interjected, something he said catching her off guard, "You've been... thinking about this? Like, more than right now?"

Mike let out a nervous laugh as he rolled to his side and brought her to his chest. "More like... I never stopped thinking about it."

Something shifted within her at his words, and the dark years between them suddenly populated with tiny lights she hadn't known were there. To think of him, alone, thinking of a future with her?

It was beautiful.

El couldn't help herself. She leaned in and caught his lips, catching him off guard.

The dream he had just laid out before her felt like a dare. A hope too dangerously amazing to entertain for even a moment... but she couldn't deny...

*She wanted it.*

A burst in her heart crashed against her chest, shaking her to her core as she bravely pushed past her fear and felt herself jump.

"I'd go to San Francisco with you."

"Yeah?" he breathed in surprise.

"Sure," she shrugged hesitantly. "I mean, I wouldn't have much going on. And I've never been to California. And it's really far away and I would love to get really far away from all of this."

Mike suddenly beamed at her with a light in his eyes that left her breathless, "I'd love that. Really, it doesn't have to be there. We can go wherever you want but..."



"Mike," she cut in as she felt a full smile slip onto her lips in response to the absolutely stunning expression on his face, "I'd go anywhere with you."

Mike smiled even brighter in reply as he pulled her to his lips, their smiles matching up in perfect parallel. She melted into him, overwhelmed, terrified, blissfully hopeful, but trying to focus only on him, on the connection her heart felt with his. She surrendered to the new hope blooming in her chest in the dying hours before everything was about to change.

It was breathtaking that even in the worst moments he could make her feel this way.

Mike Wheeler was still, after all these years, the brightest light out of the darkness.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Well, this chapter was a labor of frickin love, let me tell you. As always, thanks so much for your feedback, I love all of you so much.

Find me on Tumblr @dancingskygreen !

Check out the Spotify playlist at <https://open.spotify.com/user/laurawiese/playlist/538rIGfyj8dv6h7WZ0lj0d?si=T4nnre2DQgWOK2NtWZC1WA> !

Thank you for reading!!

-L-

## 18. Chapter 18

The black was endless.

No start. No stop.

No color. No light.

She screamed, but no sound came out.

She kicked, but her legs did not move.

Frozen. Trapped within the unmoving restraint that came from nowhere and everywhere all at once.

"Jane!"

Her heart shook violently as she tried to jerk toward the voice she knew so well. Hearing her again, her voice quaking with so much fear, ripped her soul in half.

Her voice was clear, terrified and so close.

She could not move her hands to help her.

"Jane...!"

Softer, quieter, more afraid.

"...*jane*..."

Gone

She fought against the restraint with more force, growing weaker and more horrified with every attempt. She had been so close... yet she could not save her...

"El!"

His voice echoed, too loud, too afraid, with too much pain. She could not see him, but she knew he was broken... so broken... She could not reach him. She could not save him.

"El!"

Softer, quieter

"...el!..."

Gone.

*Gone.*

***Gone.***

She screamed his name, but no sound came out.

...gone...

"Hello, Eleven."

---

El's eyes crashed open.

"El, *please* wake up. It's just a nightmare - " Mike said forcefully, hovering above her as he shook her.

She locked onto his dark eyes, alive and whole. They served to ground her as she returned sensation by sensation back into her body. Her chest was heaving. Her hands were clenched into the bed sheets. Cold sweat covered her skin.

"...Mike..." she croaked.

Mike breathed a sigh of relief. "Are you okay? I couldn't wake you for minutes."

She succeeded at nodding, relieved to find that she could move her head.

It was just a nightmare...

*It was just a nightmare...*

Mike laid down beside her after she calmed. He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her close, whispering softly that it was okay until he faded back to sleep.

El remained on her back, eyes stitched open from compounding waves of shock, giving her no choice but to stare at the dark ceiling as their voices helplessly screamed her names throughout the caverns of her mind.

Scream by scream, El felt choking guilt push like weeds through her veins.

It had been two nights. Two nights in which Kali, her sister, her protector, her unwavering partner through the last seven years, had been locked behind the doors of their shared personal hell.

...And El had spent the evening with her boyfriend smiling as they'd planned their future, as though there was no danger at all...

The contracting of her chest was instant, seizing El's throat and ravaging her with the heaviest blanket of shameful panic. Kali's face, unconscious in the Void as she'd been two nights prior, a deep gash across her chin, flooded behind El's eyelids.

Had they cleaned the cut? Was it festering? Had they shaved off her wild beautiful hair? Had they taken her clothes? Would she find her in a hospital gown?

...would she find her alive?...

El shook involuntarily. Silent tears ran down her cheeks in the dark.

She stroked Mike's arm around her waist for support, feeling the warmth of his skin and trying to channel the bright light of hope he'd bathed her in just hours prior...

...but all she could feel was his broken body as it had been in the Void all those years ago. Broken bones. Blood and sweat. Terror in his eyes. The vision of the man that *they* had crafted custom for her...

A wave of nausea crested against her throat.

There were too many hours left. Too many hours to think. To many hours to wonder what would happen. To wonder what she would find. To wonder *who* she would find.

*"...Hello, Eleven..."*

Her blood ran cold at the thought of him.

Would his voice sound the same after ten years? Would he still possess the look of suffocating calm he always had? His very presence a quiet terror that she couldn't name.

She had never found a word for what he was.

...Papa...

Instinct took over. One she wasn't even aware of as she crawled out of the bed, pulled on the first clothing she could find and left the apartment.

The hallway receded as she walked and her memory filled the space with old wooden walls. Crickets chirped in her mind as she stepped down the stairs and through the door to the other apartment. The scent of the cabin, cigarettes and coffee, arrived in her nose as she followed the singular light in the dark apartment to the man her heart sought.

His head was propped up tiredly on his hand as he scribbled on the map at the kitchen table.

The tightness in her chest eased at the sight of him.

Her dad looked up in surprise.

"Hey, kid..."

"You should be asleep," she scolded as she fell into the chair beside him.

"Same to you," he replied, his voice hoarse from lack of use. "Guess we're both breaking rules."

El fell silent as she mimicked his stance. Her eyes drifted over the map, searching for a Kali that she couldn't find. She felt his eyes on her, his unique brand of the simple scrutiny apparent in the air.

"Nightmare?" he asked quietly.

El nodded shakily, ice cracking in her chest at his perception. "How'd you know?"

"I know your face. You don't forget a thing like that." He said simply.

El's lip trembled in reply.

"Same as they used to be?" he asked.

El shook her head. "No. Different. These are new. I'm... frozen. Can't move. ...And he's there."

At her final words she felt an unspoken understanding pass between them. Hopper's face softened as he opened his arm to her. El felt so entirely grateful as she scooted her chair closer to him and fell into his side. He wrapped his arm easily around her slim shoulders and pulled her in against him.

It was dark nights at the cabin's kitchen table all over again, rain lashing the windows with claps of thunder that made her jump, his strong arm quelling the shaking of her young bony shoulders as images of the man she'd tried so hard to forget cut through her mind.

El let out a shuddering breath. Tonight, just as then, he felt like the very definition of safety. It was a comfort only her father could provide.

"There's too many hours left," she finally said. "I'm going crazy."

"Yeah, that'll happen." Hopper nodded in understanding. He rubbed his hand reassuringly against her arm. "Did I ever tell you I was Special Ops in the war?"

"No..."

"Yeah. Two years of pre-planned operations. We sometimes had up to

three months in planning before we pulled the trigger on a mission."

"That sounds terrible..."

"Not my favorite. But I'll tell ya, the second you get in that door it'll feel exactly the same as if you'd found yourself there by surprise. All the adrenalin will rush back. You'll just be better prepared, with a better chance if something goes to shit. It feels like hell right now, but it's the better way to do this."

"Yeah?" she asked.

"Yeah," he replied. "So, just keep your mind on what you need to do and why you need to do it. I'll have your back."

El nodded against his shoulder, flashes still swirling from the reaches of her nightmare. "What about the other two? Who'll have their back?"

Hopper sighed softly. "You still worried about Wheeler?"

"Look," she said, straightening up. A swirl of thoughts happened in her mind all at once. She thought about the beautiful dream Mike had planted in her heart. The danger that stood in their way. His body so broken in the Void.... and with a trill of guilt she made a decision and reached out to her father for help. "I'm not going to fight about him going in. I know he's capable and I know we need him. But... he's... he's a target."

"What do you mean he's a target?" Hopper asked, pulling away to look at her.

El swallowed hard, trying to keep her voice calm as the images arose clear as day, just as they always did for the hours after his beaten, almost lifeless, form flared in her dark dreams. "They... know him somehow. In Philly... they planted him in my head... in the Void. Do you... know about what happened in Philly?"

"Wheeler filled me in, yeah," Hopper replied, a quiet sadness entering his eyes.

"That's why we went," she said, finding it just as hard to talk about as

it always was. "I thought he was trapped."

"Oh, kid..."

"And..." her voice caught in her throat. "Brenner told his guys to kill him over the radio when they took the girls. Mike is a target."

Hopper was silent as he mulled over her words. "Why didn't you say this yesterday?"

"Because I hadn't had a chance to think," she said as she sighed. "Part of me wants to get the girls out and go back into hiding, and just go back later to do the... final part. You know, when I can... *if* I can do it with Kali. But..." El paused, her fear walking hand in hand with a lifetime of anger, each one pulling the other for control. She felt anger win as she looked into her father's eyes. "It needs to be done and I can do it. I can end it tonight. I just need this to be done."

A silent heavy moment existed between their eyes. She watched the gears move behind his eyes as he seemed to try to think of any other choice he could offer her. His face fell into dark acceptance as he realized she was right.

"But he's a target," she repeated sadly, "They'll hurt him to hurt me the first chance they get. He just... he won't listen to me about this."

"Yeah, that doesn't surprise me," Hopper said with an amused huff, "that kid doesn't take direction well."

"Tell me about it," El said as she rolled her eyes.

Hopper nodded thoughtfully. "Then we gotta keep him out of the line of fire. I'll talk to him. Lay some ground rules," Hopper rubbed her shoulder once more. "He's still going in. We need his help finding the girls. And he's more than capable of looking after himself, but... we'll keep him focused on the girls."

El felt guilty enlisting her father's help, but the whoosh of relief that cascaded over her heart told her she'd done the right thing. Her gratefulness felt so raw against the cold knives of terror that were still slicing through her veins, each with its own unique name.



She looked up at her father and yet another cold knife sliced. "Dad... you should keep yourself safe, too. I don't want -"

"- None of that, kid," Hopper cut in sternly, stopping her before she could even start her thought. "I can tell Wheeler what to do, but you can't tell me what to do."

"But – " El straightened up. The light reflected from the ring on his finger. El felt her stubbornness surge and she seized the opportunity. "What about Joyce?"

Unlike her expectation, his resolve did not waver, "Joyce knows why I'm here." His tone bristled in a way that she knew she couldn't sway. "No one knows better than my wife how important it is to be there for your kids when they need you. You know that."

El's shoulders sagged dejectedly, caught between intense gratitude and sheer terror. "It was worth a try."

"But I'll talk to Wheeler," he said as he squeezed her shoulder one last time, "That's the compromise."

"Fine..." she finally said, knowing she could do nothing but accept the terms. "Halfway happy."

Hopper chuckled. "That's my girl."

---

The late afternoon sun was beginning to set as Mike looked at his reflection in the mirror. The air had grown more tense by the hour. Hopper had been unnervingly quiet, studying the maps with unending intensity. Steve had found holes in every one of their ideas, sewing anxiety in Mike's chest as he railed back at each thought. Every detail being 'too dangerous' or 'too stupid'.

And El? El was a whole other story. She had Mike on edge no matter how much he'd tried to talk himself down. She'd said next to nothing all day. Mike had tried to reach out to her for much of the morning, but her gaze had remained a million miles away.

The most reasonable explanation for her distance was the obvious one. The same reason as all of them, just so much more intensely personal for her.

However, that didn't stop his mind from ripping apart every word he'd said the night before. Mike could never control his mouth around her and his thoughts were always five steps ahead of where they should be, thinking and planning a million dreams, contingent on a million variables. He found himself yet again, for the second time in a week, worried that he'd tried to move her too fast.

But today wasn't the day to lose himself in petty worry. So instead, he'd kept himself as busy as possible to pass the achingly long hours.

He'd packed, cleaned both of his guns, prepped his rifle, and attempted to return both apartments to their original states, air freshener being his best friend in a desperate attempt to remove the cigarette stench from Marissa's apartment.

It was odd to think of her now, like she had existed in someone else's life. With the truth of who he was back around him, everything he'd tried to create with Marissa now felt like a lie. Both to her, and to himself.

The truth was... Mike had never been normal, and six months of trying to believe that he was had brought that truth home more than he'd ever felt it before.

So, as he looked at himself the mirror, gun on his hip beneath a stolen black hoodie from the apartment upstairs, his mind focused on saving a ten-year-old telekinetic child from a government lab and finally freeing the love of his life from years on the run... Mike felt more like himself than he had in years.

And also, he felt older. The man who stared back in the reflection carried almost no trace of the boy he'd been. He took in his pale skin, dark deep set eyes, full ring of beard, and the few freckles he had left, most long faded from cold east coast winters and summers hidden away coding in basements.

Maybe it was for the best that he looked older, he thought darkly,

because he needed to feel more like a man more today than he'd felt on any other day of his life.

For him. For Sev. For El.

But first, there was more time to kill.

And so he found himself rubbing nervously at his beard as he stared at the tools necessary to do something he'd never done before. And for reasons that made him blush, he truly did not want to fuck it up.

That left one option. One that instantly washed away his feeling of being a man as the embarrassed boy returned to his body.

Mike grimaced as he peeked out of the bathroom to find Hopper studying the map as he nursed a cup of coffee.

"Hop?"

"Yep?"

"Um..." Mike stuttered, "How do I trim this thing?"

"That animal on your face finally too much?" Hopper asked, "Just shave it off."

"No... I - " Mike's face flamed worse by the second. "Will you just tell me how to trim it?"

Hopper looked up in surprise, "You're keeping it?"

"Will you just tell me?" Mike asked impatiently, his embarrassment cutting into his voice.

Hopper stared at him for a moment before a wry knowing look crossed his face. His voice was casual when he spoke, "Hot water towel on your neck. Shaving cream like normal. Straight razor a line right around your Adam's apple. Then take clippers to the rest to make the length even. You got clippers?"

"No..." Mike replied with a cringe.

"I've got mine in my bag." He said as he got up and crossed to leave the kitchen.

Beneath the embarrassment, Mike was thankful for the help. He put hot water on a hand towel and held it against his neck to open the pores like normal before grabbing shaving cream and patting it on. The straight razor he'd found in the other apartment was already ready to go. He placed it against the line of his neck... just as Hopper entered holding a set of clippers with a committed look in his eye.

Mike gulped. He knew that look. The razor at his throat suddenly made him feel entirely too vulnerable.

"So, you ever gonna tell me why the hell you lied to me?" Hopper asked as he placed the clippers on the sink.

Mike sighed, instantly regretting everything. "Are you using this as an excuse to entrap me?"

"Maybe a little," Hopper replied with a shrug, "but it looks like you need help. So, you know, two birds, one stone. Did you do the hot water first?"

"Of course I did. It's not like I haven't shaved before," Mike bit back as he lined the razor up once again.

"You gonna answer the question?"

Mike sighed as he took his first tentative swipe against the curling hairs on his skin. "Honestly? ...I forgot."

Hopper's brow furrowed, "...You *forgot* to tell me that my daughter had contacted you..."

"Yes..." Mike said honestly. "For the first few days... I kinda lost it."

Hopper was silent, his arms crossed in a way that made Mike feel entirely too small despite their comparable heights. Mike tried to focus on the second, then third, swipe. Hopper seemed to let the answer slide for the moment. "How'd you find her?"

"Accident," Mike said. "I saw her on a train as the doors closed. She

saw me too, though. She found me the next day."

"Shit," Hopper said, his eyes wide at an answer he hadn't expected.

"Yeah, that day sucked." Mike fell quiet as he gained more confidence and began to work faster against his neck. As the moments passed, a discomfort Mike had been avoiding for days grew heavy in the room. He finally stopped fighting it and let it wash over him.

"I feel like shit for not calling you." His voice felt quieter than he was used to. "I should've. But she wouldn't even let me see her at first, and I couldn't really wrap my head around any of it. I'm sorry."

"Shitty excuse. But I believe you." Hopper replied with a sigh as he rubbed the back of his neck. "You're doing alright, by the way, follow the line up a bit higher in the back." Mike's hands followed Hopper's directions. He finished the final length of line under his jaw and surveyed his results. "Looks good," Hopper said. "Wash that off and run the clippers over it. I've only got the one guard so it's gotta be the same length as mine."

Mike did as he said before taking the clippers from Hopper's outstretched hand. The buzz of the small machine filled Mike's ears as he began to run the tines through the unkempt hairs on his face. The light tickle of the metal felt foreign against his jaw.

"Well, you're gonna make it up to me, kid." Hopper said suddenly, his voice containing something hard in a way that put Mike instantly on edge. "And that means you're going to listen."

Mike forced himself to focus on his task. "What does that mean?"

"I know you know what El's plans are," Hopper said simply.

"Yeah...?"

"Well, those aren't your plans. I need you to stick to your own mission."

Mike's hand stopped moving in reply. He clicked off the clippers and turned around, facing the older man. "What do you mean by that?" he asked, an edge entering his voice.

Hopper sighed. "Kid, for this plan to work everyone needs to stick to their job. Steve and El know that. I just need you to promise me that, too. You report to Steve while you're in there."

Mike gaped at him for a moment, trying to keep up. "You think I'm just going to go in there and go rogue?"

Hopper sighed impatiently. "I'm just telling you to stick to your job. For the safety of the girls."

Mike scoffed. "For the *telekinetic* girls who can kill people with their thoughts and go invisible..."

"For the girls who might be drugged and have no idea that we're coming for them."

Mike's brow furrowed in full on frustration, before a painful understanding bloomed in his mind. A full flare of anger smashed into Mike's stomach.

"El told you to put me on a leash," he said in quiet realization.

"You're a target, Wheeler," Hopper said, not refuting Mike's assertion. "They know you. You can't fight these people in the way El can. So I need you to stick to the plan and then get out."

Mike straightened up to his full height as his temper cracked open. "I'm not going to ditch you guys if something happens!"

"I swear, Wheeler," Hopper replied with a frustrated sigh. "Have you ever taken a single direction in your life?"

"What are we fighting about?" Steve's head popped sideways into the bathroom, "Mike trying to be a hero again?"

"Shut up, Harrington," Mike said icily as he looked back at Hopper, "You can't ask me to do that."

"Well, it's the plan and you're going to follow it," Hopper replied with a savage bite in his tone that took Mike aback. "Come on, we're going over the details. I'll go up and get El."

"No need, I'm already here," El's soft voice called hesitantly from the kitchen.

Hopper shot Mike a cold demanding look before he left the bathroom. Mike did not follow the man. Instead, he looked back in the mirror, his eyes burning with anger as he clicked the machine back on and aggressively finished trimming his beard.

The repetitive cutting action was soothing, giving him control over something, anything.

The three of them were waiting for him, gathered around the table, when he finally entered the room.

Mike stopped at the sight of El.

The girl from the photos stood by the table staring back at him. Blonde hair, deadly dark rimmed eyes, shadowed cheeks, mulberry lips, dressed in tight black from head to toe, with a frown to top off her highly intimidating look.

"They only know me like this," El said plainly in response to his surprise. "I'd like to keep it that way." El ran her fingers through her wig nervously as she looked at Mike. Though he could hardly recognize her through her heavy makeup, he could see the guilty edge in her eyes.

It was all he needed to see to know for certain that this was her idea.

Mike's chest turned hard as he made the short distance to the kitchen table. He leaned against the cupboard and crossed his arms, leaving significant space between himself and the others.

Steve clicked opened a black plastic case and started to test a set of four police grade walkie talkies.

"Alright," Hopper said, ignoring the air in the room, his voice officially in work mode. "El, what's our route?"

El looked back at Mike for a second, as if she was waiting for some reaction from him. He made his face a cold blank slate. El looked hurt before she turned to the table and traced the route from the

prior day's planning across the map. "We check the rooms down this hallway on the way to the main lab. We take this lab door because there might be too many people through the side door. If they're not there, we meet up with Mike and Steve in their corridor to the right."

"Good," Hopper said, "Mike, your route? Steve already drew it for me so I know he's good."

Mike roughly pushed off of the cabinets hard and leaned over the table. His voice was monotone as he spoke nothing more than facts. "We break off with you here. We go down the long hallway and check each of those rooms on the way to the server room. If we get to the server room before finding the girls I'll handle some stuff there, then we'll do the rest of the floor around the back turn. Then - "

" - Here, take this." Steve interrupted as he handed Mike a walkie.

"So, this is where the plan changes," Hopper said before Mike could speak again. His voice was firm, leaving no room for negotiation. He held up his walkie. "These are to be used in only four occasions, and only in morse code so they don't make any more noise than they have to. Everyone still remember their morse code?"

Three heads nodded without hesitation. Hopper smiled, "Good, I trained you all well. Now, send an 'S' if you find Sev. A 'K' if you find Kali. If you complete your route and don't find anyone, send an 'N'. And 'SOS' if you're in danger you can't get out of. Steve, if you hear an SOS from us I need you to get Wheeler out first."

Mike bristled, "I don't - "

"Now, this is important," Hopper said as his hand fell firmly on Mike's shoulder. Mike seethed as he went silent. "Once you hear the 'S' and 'K', get out of the building immediately and back to the car. Or, once both teams send an 'N', get out of the building immediately. *Stay on your route*. If we don't find them in the first sweep, we'll reconvene at the car and make a plan B. Got it?"

"I'm not - " Mike interjected, his anger popping with each word until Hopper cut him cleanly off once more.



But Hopper barreled on as though Mike's voice was non-existent, "El, walk us through what we might run into in there."

El hesitated, catching eyes hesitantly with Mike for a moment. Guilt played in her features, but she quickly blinked, turned her eyes to her father, and began to speak. "Sev told me there are three Projects inside. I - I don't know much about them other than that they're grown men. One is a telekinetic, one is a concealer, and one is a planter. They - "

"What... what does that mean?" Steve interjected, a sudden sallow nervousness on his face.

"Um..." she flitted her eyes in Mike's direction again before she addressed Steve. "It means we're sending you in the direction where we don't expect to find them. Kali thinks they're kept down the hallway Hop and I are going down. I think so, too. But the planter, he can make you see things like my sister can. The concealer is the reason we can't I track anything inside the building, he can make things pretty much disappear. And the telekinetic. Well, he's like me so avoid him at all costs. They're why... they're why you guys need to just get in and out."

Mike shook his head in frustration, her descriptions doing nothing to shake his resolve. "El, if you think I'm just going to - "

"Mike, what's the security plan?" Hopper cut in instantly.

Mike looked around the room. Hopper's eyes were intent in a way that would have terrified him as a child. Steve looked annoyed that Mike would even consider pushing a less safe way. and El... El was simply staring at her hands.

Their united front didn't stop him. "You can't expect me to - "

"Security plan." Hopper barked, his hand squeezing harder against Mike's shoulder. Mike shook him off, shooting him daggers.

After a moment he gave Hopper what he asked for, but he could hardly hear himself as he talked. His mind was running a mile a minute in the other direction.

"I'll connect to the server from here and hack the system. At 8:58 the door here will be unlocked for one minute, then the system will go into lockdown. I'll program a loop on their cameras so they won't record us. I already sped up their digital clock system yesterday by six minutes, so that means workers might clock out a few minutes early and everyone else will be too late to get inside. That means we have to be there for the door to be open at 8:58 their time, which would be 8:52 for real. I'll set my watch."

Once he was done laying out the security plan, their meeting broke up for final prep. Without speaking to anyone, Mike stalked into the other room and booted up the computer. El followed him silently, sat down, and began to boost the signal for him without a word.

He knew she could feel his anger, he knew everyone could feel his anger, but he didn't care at all. Mike had proven himself. Over and over and over again... but yet again she'd found a way to try to keep him safe behind her protection.

If it wasn't so damned valiant of her he might have lost it. But this was El, the girl who'd pulled him out of the air after he'd jumped to his imminent death. The girl who'd shot him back fifteen feet and pinned him to a wall to keep him safe as she fought an inter-dimensional monster. The woman who just three days prior had choked a man to death Darth Vader style, the worst kind of slow and excruciating end, after he'd taken a shot at Mike.

He should have expected nothing less.

But that didn't change the fact that he knew he didn't deserve to be leashed.

---

El caught her reflection as she pulled on her black leather jacket and black fingerless gloves, taking comfort in the dark mask of makeup she was hidden behind. As always, everything was easier behind the mask. Even watching Mike seethe had been easier behind the mask.

She worked to push down her guilt as she ran her fingers through the

blonde wig. It had taken her an hour to clean Kali's blood from the strands.

It was time to get her sister back. It was time to end this once and for all.

El steadied her breath as she shouldered her backpack, slipped the door shut and locked the apartment with her mind. She joined the men downstairs. They were waiting, ready to go.

Nodding to her father, she silently turned on her heel and made her way out of the building for the first time in three days. Steve and Hopper overtook her on the snowy sidewalk, leading the way to a black SUV with Indiana plates.

She could feel Mike beside her as she made her way down the street, his anger heating the cold air around them. She couldn't blame him for being mad, not that it changed anything for her. They crawled into the back seat from opposite ends as Steve and Hopper loaded the back of the SUV.

El stole a glance in Mike's direction. He looked resolutely out of the window and away from El, the moonlight playing off of his pale skin in a way that made him glow. But then suddenly, like a shot, he turned to her. "Sicking your Dad on me was a low move," he said simply, his voice hard.

El sighed, grateful he had broken the silence. "Calling my Dad behind my back was a low move, too. We're even."

She heard Mike snicker. "Fair."

El turned to him. His eyes were trained on her, pleading. "I don't like any of this, Mike. At all."

His dark eyes suddenly began to glitter with tears in the streetlights.

"I lost you last time because you were trying to keep me safe..." he said thickly. "I can't lose you again."

El felt her own eyes wet at his words. She braved the tension between them and reached for his hand. He looked down at her fingers. El

moved closer.

"Mike," she said slowly. "You won't lose me."

His fingers slowly laced with hers.

"Do you promise?" he finally asked as he looked back up to her.

El felt in his gaze, for a sliver of a moment, every beautiful hopeful thing she had felt the night before.

She nodded slowly.

"Promise," she replied.

They sat in the shadowed back seat in silence for a moment as the murmured voices of the other men echoed behind the car. He looked at her with an intensity that made her burn, fingers playing with hers in a silent communication. His anger and her guilt not as big as their need for these final fleeting moments.

The hint of a smile appeared on his lips.

"You look way too cool to be seen with me," he said as he reached up and pushed an errant strand of blond hair from her face.

"I don't know about that," she replied as she looked him up and down, taking in his full black ensemble, which set off his messy black hair and cleaned up scruff in a way that made him look like he was hiding a secret. "I think you look pretty badass."

Mike laughed in surprise as he tightened his fingers around hers.

He had such a beautiful laugh. It drew her to him. He replied by doing the same. His fingers danced in hers as she felt his breath on her lips and -

"Alright, shitheads. Ready to go?" Steve interjected as he climbed into the front seat, making El jump. Her dad squeezed into the passenger seat. Before she knew it, the tires were crunching against the old snow and they were off.

It was a shockingly short time before they pulled up to the drab dark lab on 11th Avenue. Steve parked in a dark parking lot across the street, choosing a spot between multiple cars in order to bring less attention to their arrival.

"This is it," Mike whispered as he shifted to face her. She tightened her hand around his.

"Yeah."

She looked up to Mike to find him biting his lip, his resolve shaking. "I'll get your sisters," he finally said, but it was what he didn't say that she heard. El felt her heart break as he receded and acquiesced to her request.

A finger tapped on the window behind her.

"El, it's time," her father's muffled voice said through the window.

She held up one finger to the window to signal her father, not taking her eyes off of Mike, as she caught his lips in a soft kiss.

Mike sighed against her, his hand ghosting against her cheek. "I love you," he breathed in a simple reminder.

"I love you." She whispered easily in reply.

"El..." her father echoed.

It was one of the hardest things she'd ever done, to pull away from Mike in that moment. The loss was palpable in her body, waves of longing that felt impossible to fight as she scooted out of the car, shut the door, and joined her father's side.

"You ready, Kid?" Hopper asked, squeezing her shoulder, rifle strapped around this back. El nodded against him.

El nodded, jumping more than necessary when she heard the car door behind her click shut, knowing that Mike was suiting up with a god damned rifle without her cover of protection. She forced her eyes to stay forward as they entered the dark alleyway that contained their chosen entry point.

"Thanks for being here," she said softly to her father as they pulled up into shadow against the wall.

"Wouldn't have missed it for the world. Let's get this done."

They stayed silent, obscured in shadow, for a few long moments, the cold cutting into her lungs as she centered her mind, until a soft *click* echoed from the door.

"Now," Mike breathed to the group.

El tested the doorknob, and just as he'd promised, it opened with ease.

They had one minute to get through the two doors of the entry way.

Taking a deep steadying breath, El squeezed through the door and crossed through ten feet of a stark and cold florescent lit hallway before she reached the next door. Slipping open just as easily, she peeked out, saw the coast clear, and slid through, feeling the men tight on her heels until a soft 'click' communicated to her that the door was closed behind them.

Mike's hand found hers as he pulled her against the wall, their breath sounding too loud in the tile and concrete corridor that surrounded them as they counted down the seconds until the security lockdown took over the building.

El shivered, the astringent scent of the building bringing back the worst of memories. Mike ran his thumb reassuringly against her skin. She gratefully squeezed harder in reply.

And then – as if on cue – the door beside them locked in a loud click.

El felt Mike drop a quick soft kiss on her jaw right by her ear as he squeezed her hand. El looked up and their eyes locked. Mike nodded, saying a last heartfelt goodbye without a word.

El pulled away slowly from his hand and turned, forcing herself not to look back as she followed her father's resolute footsteps down the hallway.

She took a deep breath. The scent of the place threatening to undo her as she collected herself. Her emotions, her thoughts, and the beginnings of her embedded traumas all budded to the surface in the strange yet all too familiar hallway.

Entrusting Mike's safety to Steve Harrington, which her father reassured her throughout the day she could do, El channeled her thoughts onto Kali, onto Sev, and onto the last man she ever wanted to see again, who awaited her, she knew without knowing, in the office off of the lab.

As she'd been taught by her sister long ago, she pulled it all together and pushed it into growing power she felt bubbling through her body.

Finally, after losing so much, after so many years on the run, after a lifetime of waiting, it was time.

---

Mike felt his heart try to escape his chest as he watched El leave. She grew smaller down the hallway, her blond hair swaying at her shoulders, a convicted strength to her step in her trim black outfit. He did not see the girl he'd known. Not at all. He saw the woman he'd met just a week ago. Fearless yet vulnerable. Hard as nails with the softest kiss. Witty and tenacious and so goddamn beautiful.

He thought of his own reflection in return, of the man he'd seen staring back. The man who had proven himself time and again. The man who did not need to be pushed to the sidelines for his 'safety'.

And finally, out of nowhere, he thought of The Party. The dedicated band of boys who had started this journey with him over a decade ago.

What would they do?

*...If a party member requires assistance it is our duty to provide that assistance...*

An odd smile crossed his face.

Mike silently apologized to El as he watched her turn right and disappear from view. He couldn't be mad at her for trying to keep him safe... but he had a different set of rules that he lived by.

He was the Paladin, after all.

"Okay, let's go," Steve whispered, a nagging command in his voice as he poked Mike's shoulder. "And no hero shit. Do you hear me? We get in, we get the girls, we get out."

Mike rolled his eyes as he shot Steve a rebellious scowl. "No promises."

And with that, Mike Wheeler turned on his heel, rifle slipped at the ready under his arm. He easily drowned out Steve's whispered protestations as he began to stride with cool resolve into the belly of the beast.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Nobody puts Mike Wheeler in the corner.

Good news! You get an extra chapter, we're now ending on 21.

Shameless plug to send me your responses, especially now, I need the stamina to push through this end and you all are my life force!

Never forget the Spotify playlist or if you want to hang out with me on Tumblr:

@dancingskygreen on Tumblr

<https://open.spotify.com/user/laurawiese/playlist/538rIGfyj8dv6h7WZ0lj0d?si=04e9a8pYRrK3degqS6CTuw> for the playlist

- L -



## 19. Chapter 19

### Notes for the Chapter:

#### The Lab: Part One

"You'd think this whole place was abandoned," El said as she fidgeted nervously with the cuff of her leather jacket. She looked down at her feet to avoid the vision of yet another cinderblock room.

"Wish it was..." Hopper replied sardonically as he stepped around the metal shelving to take a quick peek behind. As had become the pattern, he returned his gaze to her with nothing to report. "Ready for the next room?"

El sighed as she nodded and began to tiptoe to the door, her father's footsteps calm yet resolute in her wake.

She flicked off the lights with a brush of her thoughts. Her hand slowly turned the door knob. A jump of anxiety sparked in her chest as she eased it open the slightest amount. She nosed out her head just as she had done over a dozen times in the last half hour and breathed a sigh of relief as the hallway greeted her yet again with nothing more than eerie emptiness.

El slipped through the crack and held the door ajar as Hopper did the same, their boots wasting no time to march them to the next blind door frame.

She had started their search feeling strong and focused, having somehow convinced herself that they would find the girls with some semblance of ease. However, the precious time they'd lost to an endless array of simple storage closets, mundane meeting rooms, and empty unused offices had chipped away at her confidence and left her throat just a little too tight, her breath just a little too shaky and and her focus just a little too scattered.

Well, that was one explanation.

There was another, but she didn't want to think about that.

She didn't want to think about how the air in her lungs smelled just the same as it always used to. She didn't want to feel the cold creeping in her veins as she was forced to stare at the same wood paneled walls, the same loud tile floors and the same unfocused flooding lights that she knew too well.

She resolutely did not want to be standing in this perfectly chilling replica of her childhood prison.

The nauseating carbon copy nature hadn't come as a surprise. Philadelphia had been just the same. Expectation, however, did not make the involuntary onslaught of memories or the painful lump in her throat any easier to ignore.

El neared the next doorway with shaky hands and waited for her father to pull up behind her. He walked backwards, eyes down the hall, rifle in his hand as though it was an extension of himself.

So far, she thought with a sense of gratefulness, his vigilance had not been necessary.

It was truly a marvel how quiet the building was. Whatever Mike had conjured with his clock and security hacks had seemed to deliver them the level abandonment they desperately needed if they wanted any chance of succeeding in their tasks.

His tall lean figure flitted through her mind, rifle in his own hand, his feet upon the very same tiles as her own as he moved down an identical and increasingly far away hall.

Her chest shook violently at the thought and she tried to force it out of her mind.

She could not think of him.

She could not think of where he might be. Of what he might be seeing.

Of what might be seeing him...

She wished with everything in her body that her radio would chirp with an S or a K.

It didn't.

She pushed the thought away as she quickly unlocked the door, entered another black room and flipped on another stark light.

They were greeted by more of the same. More non descript tables and chairs. More blank white cinderblock walls.

More of nothing.

They did not speak as she turned off the light and re-entered the hallway once again.

El glanced forward. There were no more rooms left to search in their first corridor. The final twenty feet was nothing but smooth uninterrupted wall that led to a sharp turn to the right. She pulled close to the wall as they started their way down the length so as to have one less exposed side as she made her way.

The cheap fake lacquered wood grain caught the light in exactly the same way as she remembered. She tried to look away, but there was nowhere else to look.

She did not notice as her hand brushed against it. She did not notice as her fingertips absentmindedly dragged upon the panes, bouncing slightly on each seam as one panel ended and a new one began. She did not notice as her mind quietly began counting the breaks, just as she had done countless times when she had traversed an identical hallway a thousand miles away.

1 - 2 - 3 - *Bump* - 1 - 2 - 3 - *Bump* - 1 - 2 - 3 -

*"Eleven, good girls keep their hands to themselves."*

Her breath caught dangerously as the voice broke with sharp clarity throughout her mind. She pulled back her fingers on instinct. Her chest tightened. The patterned '*ta-tap ta-tap ta-tap*' of his perfectly shined dress shoes echoed in memory against the tiles. She stared forward wide eyed, unwilling to look left as flashes of his silver hair seemed to dance in a tease at the corner of her sightline, his cold grip on her small hand while he traveled beside her through the hall.

El's breath came out in a shaky huff as she pulled against the end of the hallway wall hard. Pins and needles cut into her chest and twisted her stomach as she attempted to allow her rational mind to take control over the flashback.

*New York City. Jane 'El' Hopper. She repeated silently.*

*Not Eleven.*

*Not Eleven.*

Would his voice still sound the same?

El jumped in surprise as a strong hand clamped softly onto her shoulder. It was almost as though her Dad had heard the question when it had screamed through her mind. She jerked in his direction abruptly and caught his eyes.

He looked down on her with as much patience and understanding as a man with a rifle in an exposed hallway could muster, his eyes silently reminding her to breathe.

She obeyed.

Her focus found its way through the haze.

He nodded as he squeezed her shoulder, his eyes a question.

She nodded in reply, her eyes an answer.

*I'm okay*

Hopper's grip on her shoulder released as he crossed in front of her just a few feet, pushed himself up against the wall, and edged his gaze around to scope the new hallway. After a long and breathless moment, he waved her along.

The coast was clear.

El swallowed hard, pulled her focus into the roots of her thick combat boots against the floor, and took the first steps into the new hallway as they began the next phase of their search.

---

The hallway was dim, sterile and completely abandoned. Outdated wood paneling stretched as far as Mike could see.

All was chillingly calm. Well, except for one thing.

"I'm telling you and you damned well better hear me because I mean it. If you think I'm letting you out of my sight, Wheeler, you've got to be crazy," Steve griped with a mumble into Mike's ear, directly on his heels, as he repeated himself yet again. "I don't care what you think you have planned. You're not pulling any of your shithead moves on my watch. I'm telling you, *you're not*. If you get yourself killed *I'll be the one* who's gonna have to hear about it, from everyone, forever. I'm the – "

"Will you just *shut up*?" Mike finally hissed back through his teeth. "Someone will hear you."

"Just – " Steve stuttered, " - just don't pull any shit. You got me? I've got my eye on you."

Mike rolled his eyes so hard they almost fell out of his head.

Steve finally quieted and after a few seconds of silence Mike almost missed his voice.

It had been a good distraction, the domestically chastising tones of Steve Harrington. It had kept the creepy sensation of the lights that were at the same time both too bright and too dim just one step out of his mind.

They each pulled their rifles just a bit more tightly to their chests, their strides finally lining up as the silence stretched out through the absurdly long hallway. Each of them scanned behind their backs every few feet to ensure they were still alone while the length of the empty space grew longer and more shadowed behind them.

"Will you stop breathing so loud?" Steve said nervously.

"You think *I'm* the loud one?" Mike breathed in annoyance. "Can you hear your fucking feet?!"

Mike was thankful for his soft rubber soled Chuck Taylors, which served to deliver almost no echo in the cavernous hall. Not like it was doing him any favors as he walked beside the heavy clomps of Steve's police issue steel toed boots. Sure, they were probably great for traffic stops on the snowy rural Indiana roads, but inside the confines of the lab they were an entirely different story.

Steve muttered something unintelligible in reply, but his footfalls did in fact become lighter as they continued down their march.

The rooms in their first hallway were very spread out. They had encountered only three doors so far on their way, all of which were uneventful as they contained nothing more than mop buckets, extra chairs and old out of commission equipment.

Nothing was exactly going wrong, but Mike couldn't feel quite confident that it was going *right* either...

Mike tried to focus on the positives in an attempt to reignite the rush of confidence that he had felt in the first few steps of his journey such a very short time ago.

His plans to empty the building seemed to have worked, at least. He hoped with everything he had that the same was true for El and Hopper.

He eyed a security camera as they passed and envisioned the looped empty footage it was transmitting, feeling just a little less exposed by the thought.

"I see one," Steve breathed, cutting into his thoughts.

The next door appeared in view, just like all of the rest. The men hurried up to reach it and pulled their bodies against the wall to flank the doorway when they arrived. Steve looked past Mike's shoulder down the hall behind them. He nodded after a cursory check that the coast was clear.

Just like with the other rooms, a small keypad was built into the wall beside the door. Nervous to get the numbers wrong even though he felt confident he had memorized them by now, Mike pulled up his

sleeve and looked down to the small black digits he had written in Sharpee on the inside of his wrist. Bracing himself for the inevitable beeping sounds, Mike cupped his hands tightly around the keypad and punched in Brenner's personal code, which he had found in a confidential file a few days back, into the lock.

The door unlatched with ease. Steve shouldered the door open instantly and the men scampered into the room before they quickly closed it behind them. His heart rate sped up as they stood in the pitch blackness, Steve clearly fumbling for the light with a loud shuffle.

"You okay?" Mike asked as he heard Steve stumble loudly into something hard.

"Yeah, why?" Steve asked in confusion. "How about you?"

Mike dropped his question instantly as, at that moment, Steve finally flipped the light and the room they stood in came into focus.

A chill went up his spine and his breath sped up dangerously.

They found themselves in a bedroom.

Well, 'bedroom' was nice term for the cell that greeted them.

The men shared a wary glance before their eyes roved over the details of the space.

Bare white cinderblock walls lined the room in an unwelcoming and bleak manner, lit by unflattering fluorescent lights that made everything look just a little too washed out. A messed twin bed dressed in crumpled white sheets greeted them against the wall. A dent was apparent in the single pillow.

Somehow, the room felt messy, despite the minimal amount of belongings it contained.

A pile of black slacks and white shirts laid haphazardly at the foot of the bed. Two pairs of simple black men's rubber shoes were tossed in disarray in the corner.

"Okay, this place is creepy, man. Let's go to the next room," Steve said, his voice shaky as he quickly turned to the door.

Mike quickly caught his sleeve. "Are you crazy? There could be something here."

"Wheeler, we don't have time for you to play sleuth," Steve replied as he rolled his eyes and ran his hands nervously through his hair. "What do you mean there might be something here?"

"I don't know, like... a clue. A clue!" Mike emphasized. "You *are* a cop, aren't you? Don't you know how to search for evidence?"

"You have no idea what you're talking about," Steve scoffed condescendingly as he adjusted his rifle and pulled out of Mike's grasp. "Everything you know about being a cop is from watching Cagney and Lacey with your dad. Now, we've got two girls and your computer room to find and I don't really see any of that here. Let's - ."

" - Yeah, exactly," Mike piped back. "We're looking for a girl who's lived here her whole life and we're standing in a *bedroom* inside of a government building. Sooo... I think it's worth taking a look around." Mike didn't wait for Steve to respond before he turned his back to him and walked further into the room. "Just give me one minute. Then I think the server room is close down the hall."

"Fine," Steve relented with a sigh. "Just hurry up."

Mike pushed his rifle strap around so that the rifle sat on his back as he began to investigate the space. He opened the drawers of the tiny dresser one by one, completely unsure of what on Earth he should be looking for. The drawers turned out to be mostly empty besides a few more black pairs of slacks, white shirts and a scattering of folded hospital gowns. Mike shut each drawer once he was done, careful to return them to the exact way he'd found them. He then eased onto the cold floor and brought his eyes down to look under the metal bed frame. Something in his stomach jumped violently. He brushed it off as he rolled his eyes at himself, dismissing it as a childlike fear.

He got up onto his knees, searching around for something else to check as he absentmindedly ran his hand across the warm mused



sheets.

A devastating thought interrupted his movements.

Was this like the room that El had grown up in?

Mike bit back a dark sigh and pressed his eyes tightly shut. He knew the answer.

It hardened his resolve.

"Alright, next room," Mike said quickly as he pulled himself up to his feet.

"You crack the case, Detective?" Steve asked in a patronizing tone as he pulled his rifle back into his hands.

"Shut up, Steve."

Steve snickered as Mike made his way to the door. Steve flicked the light switch off before Mike eased the metal door open, holding it for Steve to exit. Steve craned his head out ever so slightly, and when the coast was deemed clear he stepped out into the hallway and beckoned for Mike to follow. Mike followed closely behind him and tried to pull the door shut. It stuck at first. Mike had to yank hard twice before the door finally seemed to give way. He clicked it shut as lightly as he could.

Mike stepped back and stumbled over something. Steve's foot was the likely culprit.

"Sorry," Mike whispered, adjusting his rifle as he stood up straight and looked both ways down the hallway.

"For what?" Steve asked, a couple of feet ahead of him as he took the lead and began his march down the hallway.

Mike blinked, but didn't answer.

He looked over his shoulder one more time, oddly nervous in a way that he hadn't been before. In a way that he couldn't quite place. He worked to shake it off and followed Steve down the hall, eyes flicking

behind him just a bit more often than before as he left the ever lengthening hallway in his wake.

---

El felt herself leave shadow as she walked quietly into the new hallway. This stretch was brighter, wider and longer than the last. It contained many more doors, as well as recessed alcoves and tiny offshoot hallways that could be seen further along on their path.

The brightness of this new hallway felt overwhelming. Anyone could see her here in this new wide open space. She couldn't help but feel uncomfortably on display. The same had been true for the last corridor, of course, but the dim lighting at served as a slight comfort that she was not desperate to return to.

The sensation of being exposed was foreign, unwelcome, and it filled her with longing. She ached for her sister.

Kali's face suddenly swam up in her mind afresh, just as it had been in the Void, and El shuddered as her feet instinctively began to move faster down the hallway.

She was here... somewhere...

At that, El's view of the hallway shifted into something darker and even more nerve wracking than before. The hallways suddenly felt like a series of secret prize doors on a sick game show, her sister lurking behind one... if she were lucky. Something else, much less appealing, and potentially much more sinister, lurking behind any of them as well.

It was a game at which she could not cheat, no matter how hard she tried. For the magnetic sensation that El was so accustomed to, the singular sensation that guided her in moments like these like a compass in her chest, delivered absolutely nothing to signal Kali's presence. She knew without even attempting to track that the Concealer's power still blocked her view, even within the very walls of his concealment.

El gritted her teeth as a wave of helpless panic pushed into her veins.

Just then they reached the first door and she tripped the lock and quickly fled inside. It was a solace to have a split second's place to hide. As with every other room, they found nothing but abandonment. A standard issue desk. A standard issue lamp, unplugged and sitting discarded on the floor.

A non descript vinyl chair... a perfect twin to the one that had sat in her bedroom as a child.

...The chair where she would sit swinging her feet for hours on end as she'd twirled her long hair around her fingers and waited impatiently for him to arrive... Day in and day out. Day in and day out.

El swallowed back on the memory hard and moved along to the next room, trying to abandon the thoughts behind the relocked door.

But it followed.

So she moved to the next. And the next. And the next.

Yet again, and again, and again, she found no Kali. She found no Sev. She found no clues. She found nothing at all.

...Just the cold sticky sensation of the vinyl chair against her thighs as she wriggled around in her itchy blue romper.

Another room. More of nothing.

...Just the coarseness of his crisp white lab coat against her cheek as he opened the door and she rushed to hug him hello.

Another room. Nothing.

...Just his hand, firm yet soft, stroking her long hair as he sat down beside her on the bed.

Another. Nothing.

*"You are special in ways you don't yet know, Eleven - "*

She fled faster into the hallway, almost at a run, to find that they had

only one door left before the hallway cut to the right.

Her feet stopped abruptly as cold realization filled her veins.

She knew where she was.

She had spent hours staring at the map. Studying it. Tracing it with her fingers. Memorizing her route.

She knew that she could find a short corridor that ended at a set of large cold double doors right around the bend of the next hallway.

She knew where those double doors led...

El caught her father's eye as he pulled up behind her. She could tell that they shared the same thoughts. His gaze was cold, resolved, yet slightly hesitant. As though he wanted to turn back and whisk her away from everything that lay beyond.

In truth, she would have done anything in order to do the same for him.

She moved to open the door, but a soft *crack* echoed through the halls instead.

El froze, her eyes instantly back on her father. His hands tightened on his rifle as he looked around their exposed space. They waited, each breath feeling like an eternity as they sensed presence for the first time. Each blink of her eye produced movement at the edges of her vision, making her jump.

However, no voices followed. No footsteps rang through the halls.

Finally, Hopper nodded and El slipped the lock as slowly as she could so as to keep it as silent as possible. The lock on the door clicked just like all of the others and they slipped into their final hiding place.

"Was that - ?"

"I don't know..." he replied. "Turn on the light."

On command, she illuminated where they stood.

El was greeted by her own reflection in a full wall mirror. A cold rush of dread melted down her body.

The simple metal table.

Too familiar.

The three black chairs.

Too familiar.

The large mirrored wall...

**Nothing**, she told herself firmly despite the tremble growing in her hands.

This was not the place...

Noth -

" You may begin."

*Her tiny body winced in confusion as she felt the strange man's rough hand enter her hair and pull on the long fine strands. A shocked gasp escaped her lips as the first careless snip echoed off of the walls an instant later, tight and high against her scalp. Eleven watched in horror as the mirror reflected her long light brown lock falling against her shoulder before it wafted unceremoniously to the floor.*

*" Papa...?" she creaked, begging for help as she jerked in an attempt to look up to him. The strange man's hand tightened in her hair to keep her from moving, making her squeal.*

*" Stay still, Eleven." Papa said in his firm yet smooth monotone.*

*Something within the tiny girl writhed. She attempted yet again to squirm away from the man's hands in her hair, yet P apa's hand caught the strap of her blue romper and held her tightly in place.*

*Her lip trembled in reply as she felt herself immobile.*

*Another snip echoed. The cold metal of the scissors so close to biting into*

*the skin.*

*She did not understand... She did not understand why.*

*Her hair.*

***Her hair.***

*A scream cut from Eleven's mouth as the scissors continued their assault, robbing her slowly and steadily of the only thing she truly loved in her tiny world. Tears began to stream down her face, her terror reflecting back to her in the mirror as Papa continued to hold her down tightly and the bad man dropped her hair to the floor, piece by mangled piece.*

"Kid... Kid? You okay?"

"Wh- what?" El asked abruptly, looking up in surprise as her Dad's soft and slow voice cut through her paralyzed body.

"You're shaking."

El looked down at her hands at his words. She tried to breathe in, but her chest still caught. The worst kind of butterflies were ravaging away, pushing to explode, making it impossible for her lungs to easily inflate. She did not speak as the feeling washed over her, her breath coming and going in quick audible huffs.

El knew that the panic belonged in the past, but that did not stop it from cresting over her as she caught herself in the mirror. Beneath her dark rimmed shadowed eyes, beneath her years of age, she could still see in the depths of her gaze the tiny girl who had sat looking at herself in terror as just she did now. The fear that danced on the surface of her heart reflected back to her in radiant intensity, glazed with unfallen tears, no longer able to hide.

She watched as her eyes tightened, her lips hardened, and she blinked.

El's face disappeared as the mirror shattered spectacularly to the floor.

"Jesus! Was that necessary?" Hopper exclaimed in a hush as he

jumped in shock.

"Yes," El said simply.

She stepped forward and a light appeared in the room through the new hole in the wall. She had always wondered as a child what had lied beyond the mirrors. It was not a surprise to see the tables, monitors and recording equipment that sat on the other side. The places where they'd watched her, even when she hadn't known...

She felt her mouth harden into a scowl.

"Let's go," she said as she turned to the door. She squinted aggressively and the light bulbs in the ceiling popped loudly with a satisfying *crunch*, ushering them into pitch black darkness. "There's nothing here."

---

"Wheeler, is this weird? This is weird," Steve finally stated in a nervous tremble.

His voice echoed Mike's thoughts exactly.

"Yeah...it's weird."

Mike felt horribly turned around. Had they memorized the floor plan incorrectly? Had it been out of date or mislabeled? He couldn't be sure, but the question made slivers of panic course through his veins as they continued down their second hall... and found no doors at all.

"I really think the server room is soon," Mike whispered. "It has to be. That room was marked."

Steve and Mike's shoulders were almost brushing as they subconsciously huddled closer. Their over the shoulder looks had somehow fallen into sync as each of them glanced back behind them in a patterned motion on an alternating schedule. Every time they came up empty, breathed a sigh of relief, and started the process again.

"I think I see one," Steve whispered tersely as he cocked his rifle forward.

Mike looked forward.

Sure enough, a door stood off to the right.

Their feet picked up speed instantly until they pulled up against the door sill, desperate to get inside so they could have a second to regain their wits without the fear of being seen. Mike quickly keyed in Brenner's code, no longer worrying about stealth as he sought speed. The door unlocked with a light 'click' and Mike eased it open just enough to slide in, hinging it slightly further so Steve could follow him.

"Dude, don't push me," Steve said as he stumbled into the dark and managed to shut the door.

But Mike wasn't listening.

He was too busy breathing a massive sigh of relief.

Small green and blue lights blinked and shined around him in the dark.

"We're here," Mike said as he wrestled the rifle to his back. "Get the light."

Steve fumbled against the wall for a long time as Mike ran his eyes across the room. It was so insanely odd to stand here, in the physical space that he had hacked into hundreds of times. A satisfied smile cut across his lips as he thought about all of the tiny bits of code that held his falsely spun information, all embedded into the metal and plastic of the hard drives on the racks around him.

A conspiratorial sense of power waved over him as his eyes shifted to the bank of computers on a long table against the wall.

"Can't find the lights, man. Where do you think they'd be?" Steve asked.

"Try the other wall," Mike said absentmindedly as he stepped forward toward the table with a positive sense of anticipation.

It likely didn't matter which computer he chose, so he walked to the



one sitting in the middle. The green light of its monitor indicated it was simply asleep. He reached out to put his hand on the mouse to wake it up...

...but his hand made an unexpected fist.

There was nothing to grab.

With an icy cold jolt to his stomach, Mike watched as his hand drifted through the entire table, as though nothing existed there at all.

---

Reality had finally clicked.

She had been avoiding it. Pushing it away with every fiber of her being from the moment she had stepped into the building. Likely longer. Day. Months. Years.

She could not avoid it any more.

It had cracked open and spilled across her entire heart.

She could feel him everywhere. He was in the walls. In the lights. He felt alive inside of her skin.

She was not ready to face him.

She was never going to be ready to face him.

She had to be ready to face him.

El swallowed hard and her hand reached for the doorknob as she prepared to leave the shattered mirror behind. She stopped for a moment as she felt her father's hand landed softly against her back. He rubbed two reassuring circles against her before he pulled away.

The deepest sense of gratitude rushed through her at his touch.

El took a deep breath, opened the door... and froze.

Martin Brenner stared back at her from the hallway.

He regarded her with a look of mild surprise.

"Hello, Eleven," he said slowly, his voice kind yet cold. Just as it always had been.

Before El could even think to breathe, before she could even process all of the ways in which he'd aged, or the long gashing scars that now raked across his face, or his thinning hair that no longer retained its perfect shape, he looked to the right, nodded quickly, and disappeared like a flash from her eyes, leaving nothing but unbroken hallways in her vision.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Hi guys, so here we are. What's going on here?! I'd love to hear from you so we can keep up the newly revved momentum and get you the next installment ASAP.

I haaaaate going this long between updates. I have a million good reasons but it still killed me so I won't bore you with them. Rest assured, I have cancelled all of my plans in the coming days so I can deep dive into the rest of this. My goal is to get you the next chapter over this weekend. If I can't, I'll post a new expected date on my tumblr @dancingskygreen so go follow me there if you want status updates.

Thank you for your patience and your polite nudges.

Stay tuned for Part Two cuz it's gonnna be a ride.

## 20. Chapter 20

### Notes for the Chapter:

#### The Lab: Part Two

El stood in the threshold of the darkened doorway, every nerve on edge as she scanned the length of the hall with frenzied eagle eyed precision.

She hoped against all hope that he had been a figment of her imagination, but she knew in the darkest pit of her stomach that was not the case. The man who lived in the depths of her mind was not the man who had just appeared... except for that he was.

He was here. Staring at her while she searched for him. Yet, she could not see him. She could not even sense his presence.

He did not possess that kind of power.

He was not alone.

Behind her, concealed against the dark and shadowed walls, she felt her father silently ready his rifle.

And then... the lights flickered from above her. Not of her accord.

The sight worked like a trigger through the depths of her body. Her burning rod of primal force awoke in full. It surged through her veins and splashed like acid inside the tips of her fingers.

Just in time.

Because at that moment, an unknown power sliced through the air in her direction. El's hand shot up on instinct. Power tore from her body not as a deadly force, but for the first time in her life, as a shield.

Telekinetic energy crashed against telekinetic energy in the space in front of her, rocking the floor with an intensity she had never felt before. A scream ripped from her mouth as the sonic blowback lifted her from her feet and smashed her back into the door frame.

El winced dreadfully. Breath heavy, heart on the edge, her eyes darted in desperate search for the unseen enemy.

Still, there was nothing. Nothing more than cracks in the walls around them, sputtering small clouds of dust from exploded bursts of force.

She forced a deep breath.

With no other choice at hand, El reared up on her knees and directed every ounce of power she had into the nebulous space of the hall. She gasped as she felt it blocked, the powers crashing through the air with worse intensity than the first collision. It blasted through the space in front of her, flinging her forcefully across the floor and down the hallway.

Crunching sounds echoed through the hallway as the beams and pillars stressed from the impact.

This time there was no pause. No breath between the waves. No time for El to have even a single thought.

Another jet of intensity barreled in her direction.

She arched her back from where she laid, sprawled on the floor, and pushed with everything she had to ward off the next assault.

The surges collided with a deafening crash. Not into the air, but into a wall.

The wall that contained the doorway where she had just been standing.

The wall that contained her father, concealed in darkness behind it.

El screamed in horror as the concrete and the tile detonated into a brilliant explosion of rock and metal and ceiling and glass.

With no time for thought, El shot every ounce of her power toward the impending carnage, for the safety of her father, his presence unseen in the clouding dust.

The mass of debris froze instantly in the air. Each dust particle locked in suspended animation.

She flung her hand to scrape the tons of wreckage from his path -

But it only shifted about two feet before it slipped helplessly from her mental grip -

... because at that moment a jolt took hold of her from her left, her attention diverted just long enough to let the enemy break through into her body.

It wrapped around her powers. Ensnared them. Rendered them useless.

She watched in helpless shock as the rubble crashed with full force into the ground.

Two screams filled the air.

One scream she recognized so well, too well.

Her heart shattered in shocked terror.

One scream she did not recognize at all.

El tried to scream, but no sound came out.

She tried to kick, but her legs would not move.

Flashes of cold white snow, of a small girl's wide mirthful eyes, flashed across her mind's eye as she writhed against invisible restraints and pushed against unmoving lips. Her veins filled with agony as she tried and failed to crawl even an inch across the floor toward where Jim Hopper lay unseen.

Right in the line of her vision, two men appeared out of thin air.

She recoiled on instinct, but got nowhere at all.

Martin Brenner, once again visible just as he had been just moments before, looked around the space with a hint of surprise.

Beside him, eyes trained with a deadly unwavering clutch upon El's body, stood a man she knew all too well, though they had never met. She could never forget him, no matter how hard she'd tried. He had been a constant visitor to her nightmares since he had first found his way into her mind at sixteen.

His ice blue eyes were trained on her with rigid intensity. His pockmarked face contorted as he held the choking leash on her powers.

Dr. Brenner slowly looked to the floor on his left and sighed with slight annoyance.

"Pity."

She followed his eyes.

Half concealed in rubble fifteen feet away, a body lay mangled. Clothed in the ratted and bloodied remains of a hospital gown. Head buried beneath the rubble.

She could just make out a small '004' on an arm that stuck out limp on the ground.

Everything slotted into place at once as she looked back to the man who had raised her in full view, no longer able to hide.

His concealer was dead.

Brenner turned back to her. Their eyes connected in the forced silence. El felt nothing and everything in their locked gaze.

"One," Brenner said in simple command as he regarded the man beside him. "Please bring Eleven to the lab."

---

"I found the light switch but it's not working."

Mike's voice caught in his throat as he tried to respond to Steve's confusion. He wasn't sure if he was capable of words at all. Every breath he took made the icy chill of paranoid fear crawl higher and thicker up his back. He watched as his hand shook violently within

the illusion that surrounded him.

He had not prepared any plan for *this*.

Moving slowly, hands fumbling to ready the rifle strapped to his body, Mike shuffled backwards. Step by step, he moved away from the vision and deeper into the black room, the sound of Steve's clomping boots serving as a lifeline, a goal.

There was infinitely grateful for the sound. For, it was the only thing he knew to be real.

He bumped directly into the other man's back.

"Wheeler?" Steve breathed in surprise.

"Yeah," he replied, his shaky voice betraying his tension. He pushed deep into Steve's back.

And that's when he felt it.

He felt so stupid.

It had been there ever since the bedroom, crackling in the air. It was so like the static El would emanate when she was activated, but much more sinister.

A presence of power. It radiated directly in front of him.

Mike closed his eyes, every muscle shaking, and went on instinct.

With as much speed as he could muster, Mike pointed his rifle forward, finger on the trigger. But he could not point it, because it bounced hard off of as hit bluntly smashed into unseen flesh.

And, in reply, the vision in front of his eyes *glitched*.

"What the shit was that?!" Steve cried, his voice an octave higher than before as he pressed deeper into Mike's back.

Mike gasped as the rifle tugged with immense force out of his hands, the strap breaking and falling as his weapon disappeared into the

darkness.

"Door... DOOR!" Mike yelled, adrenaline filling his veins as his feet began to move. Steve went rigid behind him, sensing the urgency in Mike's voice, and ran.

Mike bit back a sigh of relief as the sound of a doorknob turned in Steve's hand. He stepped back one more foot –

And everything changed.

Lights appeared above them. They stood in a completely unremarkable room.

But that was not what Steve seemed to see.

"Wheeeeler..." Steve breathed behind him. "Oh my God. FUCK!"

Mike whipped around as Steve jumped into the air, knocking Mike off balance and sending him crashing to the floor.

"Wheeler, get out! GET OUT!"

Splayed on his back, Mike looked up in dread as he watched Steve Harrington scream and yell and fling the butt of his rifle against the air to fight off... nothing.

Whatever Steve could see... it was not visible to Mike.

"Steve! It's not r – "

But he did not have a chance to finish his sentence.

Mike's eyes bulged in shock as massive hands closed against his throat and wrenched him back. His head knocked hard against the tiles. A man twice his size spun over him, straddled his waist, and pinned him to the ground. Trapped in the man's hands, he sputtered, unable to do anything but stare up into the man's face as he fought and failed to gain air.

Mike writhed and kicked. The man grimaced in reply, sweat lacing his brow as his dark eyes gleamed down on Mike. His grip grew



stronger and his arms jerked against Mike in a way that made the '006' etched into his forearm flash across Mike's vision.

"Why did you come into my room, Michael Wheeler?"

Disoriented panic took over his mind as he choked. He tried once again to kick. He flailed his arms in a futile attempt to reach one of his guns.

His vision began to fill with stars as his chest began to collapse.

The man simply stared down at him as though he was studying Mike like a painting.

"I know your face," he said simply, spit coming from his mouth and spraying against Mike's face. "I made you once. For her. For inside of her mind. Eleven."

A chilling spike of rage sparked through Mike's body at the mention of her name. His thin hands wrapped around the man's thick arm and he jerked with every bit of might that he had, the slightest gasp of air entering his lungs before the man's hand retightened, harder this time, around his throat.

"That was fun," the man continued, unperturbed. Something soulless existed in the shape of his words. "Creating you. Sending you to her. It drove her mad. I like it when that happens."

The static at the edge of Mike's eyes was becoming dark rims, his focus slipping as the last of his oxygen was depleted.

Steve's aggressive screams suddenly changed, breaking through Mike's slipping consciousness.

"Mike?! Where are - Get this fucking thing off of me, shithead! I can punch right through it. You picked the wrong guy! I *know* what the fuck this is, I fought one for real! You're not fooling me with this shit! Mike!? Are you here?!"

He mouthed Steve's name helplessly, but only small choking sounds came out instead.

The lights began to dim as his body gave over to the sheer agony filling his chest, his limbs, everywhere. He -

A deafening **crash** smashed off the walls, rocking the entire room and causing the man on top of him to falter. Mike gasped, his windpipe free. The oxygen burned against his throat as his body sucked in every ounce of air that it could.

The man's hand returned its choke hold, his eyes growing darker as they gazed down on Mike. Blood began to drip from his nose and onto Mike's coat.

Yet, as quickly as his hand reattached - it was gone.

With the intensity of a tidal wave, the man on top of him, Six, The Planter, ripped off his body with a force that could never have belonged to Steve Harrington.

Mike watched with a new kind of shock as the man flew screaming through the air and crashed into the wall.

A voice, small yet incredibly forceful, sounded through the room.

"NOT MIKE."

The sickening crunch of a neck snap filled Mike's ears. The man's lifeless body slid down the wall into a discarded clump.

Mike went limp against the floor. He stared blindly into the middle distance as confusion laced his mind and mixed with a physical pain worse than anything he had ever felt in his life.

Suddenly, directly above him, leaning over his body, a face popped spectacularly into view, as if it had been there all along.

A small girl. Blood trickled from her nose and tears trickled from her ice blue eyes. Her lip quivered as she stared down with worry at Mike.

Mike's throat burned as he rasped out her name, but he did not care about the pain. His body quaked in layers of relief.

"Sev."

---

The cuts and scrapes that had ripped through her clothing and then through her skin burned up and down her body as One abruptly stopped moving her. Her glazed eyes were faced upward, toward the exposed piping of the two story high ceiling of the lab.

Though it was the hardest thing she had ever done, El had stopped trying to fight against the entrapment. Just as she had found when Sev had playfully caught her in her clutches on the roof a few days back, any and all attempts to fight against the hold resulted in bone breaking agony and drained her energy faster than anything she'd ever felt before.

She never thought she'd have felt grateful for the terrifying moment on the roof. At least the sensation was familiar now, she thought darkly in the silence. It contained a twinge less confusion, which left space for a twinge more frenzied thought.

And that was what she did. Thought. She had rooted around in her mind like a mechanic as she was dragged down the hallways, trying to find the switch, trying to find what had broken and if there was any way for her to fix it from the inside. Trying to find if there was anything at all that she could still do within this frozen form.

"One," Brenner's voice cut through her thoughts. "I'd like you to face her toward me."

The coolness of the cold tile floor felt like the smallest relief against the scrapes on her cheek as her body rolled to her side against her own volition.

The two men came back into her sight, standing in a lab that instantly stole that thread of relief from her body.

It was so familiar. So horrifying familiar.

"Eleven. It's kind of you to finally join us." Brenner said in kind greeting as he crossed toward her a couple of feet. In truth, he was quite far away. At least twenty feet. He seemed to keep his distance

for reasons that she could not quite comprehend.

The years had not been kind to the man. His eyes were colder. The scars that traced his face were thick and ragged and numerous. She knew where they were from, and she shivered as she remembered the last time he had held her, just moments before those scars were formed.

He looked tired. Not as though he'd had a long day, but as though life was beginning to wear upon him in just the slightest way.

Yet still, just as he always had, he stood tall.

"I've been waiting for you," he said as he crossed his arms. "I must say, I'm surprised to see you tonight, at this exact moment. But that's alright. I'm glad you're here all the same." A procedural smile graced his face. "I've missed you."

Bile reached the back of El's throat at his words, causing her to choke.

Brenner beckoned the pock marked man forward. The hold against her tightened ever so slightly as the man rigidly stepped closer and came into the light.

Blood was pooling from both of his nostrils. His body shook slightly. His ice blue eyes shone as though they radiated the power in a laser themselves.

"Eleven, I'd like you to meet One," Brenner said as he began to pace again. "A family member of yours, if you will. Think of him as... your Uncle. It's been some time, but you must remember him, yes? We tried to communicate with you many years ago through the inter-dimensional channel. I believe it was a successful connection. You seemed to have heard us. You *did* hear us, correct?" He waited for her to answer, but continued after a quick moment. "It had been a team effort to contact you then. The entire Project worked on it for quite some time. You had a wall against us. It didn't surprise me. You had always been so strong." He nodded to her, his voice a compliment before he shook his head. "We so hoped you would have returned then. It's a pity, really. We could have had so many more years

together."

El's power began to shake against the restraints, her body instinctually fighting for control again as each word from Brenner's mouth served to build the screaming intensity within her body.

He continued as he gestured to One once again.

"You might be interested to know that One here knew your mother. Quite well, actually. They were a part of the same class. He, however, wanted to continue," he added, before a slight frustration entered his voice. "Unlike her."

His hands found their way behind his back as he continued to pace, just the way they used to.

"As a result, One here is one of our most valuable assets. Some of your powers were shaped directly after his. You owe a great deal to this man. He could teach you so much more."

One stumbled beside Brenner as El bucked yet again against the restraint, but the chains that bound her did not budge.

"Ah yes, this," Brenner regarded casually as he watched One regain full control. "This is not familiar to you, I imagine. These are new controls. Well, not *new* exactly, but new to you. We had to create them after your... incident, back in Indiana. Checks and balances, if you will, so that things do not get too out of hand again. That is what is happening to you now. It is unpleasant, I expect, but it is necessary. For just a while longer."

At that, Brenner turned back to El and finally walked closer. His eyes began to light up with something akin to kindness. El instinctually tried to pull away, to no success.

"Did Seventeen share with this you?" he asked softly. "I must say, I was unimpressed when you intercepted the girl a few weeks back. No one was more distraught than One, however. One missed his daughter dreadfully. We are both glad she is back home."

All of El's attempts to fight quelled as a cold shock of her words laced down her body.

Her eyes darted to One. To his ice blue eyes. To the eyes that had haunted her dreams. To the eyes that could have been Sev's, but for the soulless void they contained.

"She's much like you," Brenner continued. "I'm sure you noticed that. In fact, other than you, she was the only other successful second generation we'd been able to create." He stated the words casually, as though he was speaking about science involving plants. "You'd think it would be otherwise, but the survival rate of second generations such as yourself is extremely low. Powers such as yours can wreak havoc on young bodies. We've seen some terrible mishaps over the years. You and Seventeen never seemed to have much problem with that. Nine, however, lasted just six years, and most of the others died before they were three. The numbers climbed more quickly than I would have anticipated.

"Seventeen," he continued, with a hint of fondness. "We've been lucky with her. She's always been a powerful and fast learner. Very obedient. Until recently, that is. It is always the girls who are difficult to control at this time in their lives. It seems there is something rebellious about the females when they reach her age. It's to be expected, really. Puberty is a volatile time for any child.

"But I digress," he said with a smile. "Seventeen has shown herself to be the best subject we have ever created. Her array of powers is outstanding. More vast than yours by a long shot, Eleven. In truth, more vast than all of our remaining subjects combined. I'm sure she showed you a taste of that while she was in your presence."

Sev's face danced through her mind while Brenner spoke.

And that was when she felt it.

It had returned to her body silently in the shock of the explosion. Unhindered. Unbridled.

It was the tiniest light at the end of a tunnel.

She could feel her again. Sev. Just as she could feel Kali.

They were here.

It was true that One possessed unyielding control over her body. But it seemed he did not have control over her mind. Only the Concealer seemed to have possessed that power.

He was gone. Dead. Beneath the rubble.

With...

Brenner's voice continued but El was no longer listening.

El had slipped inside, pulling together all of the reserves of power that she could muster, shocked at how weak she felt under the clutches. Channeling the open channel on her walkie talkie, she slid shakily into the Void in search of the daughter of the man who had entrapped her.

---

"Sev."

Mike scrambled to sitting, his chest heaving as he coughed, every ounce of air painful against his crushed throat as his mind began to question what he saw and panic renewed within him.

"Sev," he asked shakily, his eyes wide with paranoia. "Can you prove you're you?"

"Prove?" she repeated, her brows knotted in confusion.

"Yeah... can you... can you tell me something only you and I know? I need to know you're you. That this is... real."

Sev was quiet for a moment as she stood beside him, eye to eye as he sat staring at her. She worked out the words to to understand. Finally, she nodded.

Slowly, she raised her hand. "High five?" she said quietly.

All of the breath rushed out of Mike's body in relief as he reached out and high fived the little girl. He pulled her into a tight hug, their night on the roof as vivid to him as it seemed to be to her. Her slender arms draped his shoulders as she clutched tightly onto his coat and began to shake.

She felt so incredibly tiny in his arms. It was unbelievable to imagine that she had just saved his life with brute force.

Mike hugged her tighter. "Are you okay?"

She nodded against him. "You came..."

"Of course I came. I wasn't going to leave you here," Mike said with a slight laugh as he pulled away, shocked at how hoarse and raw his voice sounded, but pushing the dark thought away. "We're getting you out of here, okay? How did... how did you find me?"

"Heard you," she said, tapping at her temple. "I couldn't hear you. For days. I tried and... tried. Then I did, so I came."

"You saved me, Sev. Thank you," Mike said sincerely as he looked at the girl. She nodded shakily and then spied her eyes over to the man crumpled on the floor, averting her gaze instantly once it got there, her body shaking just a little bit more within Mike's arms.

"He was.. uncle," she sputtered. "He was... a bad man'.

"I am so so sorry," he whispered as he pulled her in tighter. "We're here to get you out again. For good this time. He can't do that anymore, okay?"

Sev nodded against his shoulder and sniffled. "Okay."

Mike hugged the girl in silence for a moment as she clung to him, so small, so frail. Something within him, an anxiety he had been carrying for days, loosened as he allowed himself to feel the overwhelming rush of relief at finding her.

Mike looked up to see Steve, wide eyed, standing off in a far corner, keeping his distance. Mike pulled the girl away from him gently and nodded behind toward him.

"Sev, this is our friend. Steve. He's here to help us get you out of here."

Steve was stark still, eyes wide as he merely waved in stunned reply. If the situation hadn't been so incredibly dire, Mike would have found



it hilarious.

But the circumstances were dire. They were not done.

"Sev," he said as he reached up and wiped the blood from her nose with his sleeve. "Do you know where Kali is?"

Sev dropped her eyes shut for no more than two seconds before they sprang back open and she nodded.

"Yes. Close." She said simply.

Renewed confidence and adrenalin spiked through Mike as she confirmed. "Can you take us to her. Can you... make us invisible like you so no one can see us? I think our cover might have been blown with the all noise in here."

Sev nodded without hesitation. "Yes. Easy."

Mike smiled in full back at the girl. He stood up, his limbs shaky but strengthened by the turn of events.

"Steve," he said, looking up to his partner on the other side of the room, cocking him a small awe filled smile. "You ready to be invisible?"

Steve took long strides to meet them where they stood. "Won't be the craziest thing that's happened in the last ten minutes, so sure... let's do it."

"Okay so how do we..." Mike asked, looking down at Sev for instruction.

She shrugged. "You are. We all are."

"You're amazing, kid," he said gratefully as he took her hand, led them out of the room and re-entered the hallway.

They moved so much faster under the cover of Sev's powers. And they were infinitely lucky to have them.

The hallways were no longer abandoned. Small groups of security

detail seemed to be moving through the building every which way, stalking the halls with confused looks on their faces, speaking in hushed tones. Sev took the lead, winding them quickly through hallways she clearly knew, stopping them whenever for easy concealment whenever someone approached.

Steve's eyes were wide as people passed him without any knowledge of his presence. He walked more quietly than Mike had ever heard before. Jumping at each new person, his rifle at the ready, he looked shocked again and again as they simply strolled past.

Something twisted uncomfortably in Mike as he regarded the movements of the men, knowing that not everyone in the building had the privilege of being invisible...

But right about the time the anxiety crested in his body, Sev stopped fast and flicked her head.

"Here," Sev whispered. The door began to ease open by way of Sev's mind before he even turned toward the door.

The trio slipped into the dark room and latched the door quickly behind them. Muffled angry sounds came from the back of the room.

Kali appeared in the light, draped in a stained hospital gown and tied down to a bed against the back wall with an intensity that Mike had never seen before. Every limb was laced tight, looping around her every inch or two. The same could be said for her center. He could not imagine how many feet of rope had been used to secure her.

Mike's skin crawled. He was so grateful that El was not here to see this.

She stared at the ceiling, unable to turn to them, as she cursed through the gag in her mouth.

Steve ran forward as he fished a knife in his pocket. He leaned down and began without pause to work on the ropes as Mike walked forward and removed the gag from Kali's mouth.

"Kali," he said emphatically with a rejuvenated smile at the sight of her. "We're here to get you out."

Her eyes were mutinous as she looked up at him.

It was the last look he would have ever expected.

"Like I'm going to fucking believe that. You assholes are running out of ideas," She bit, clearly unconvinced.

"No! I'm - " but he didn't get more than two words out before the room filled with black crawling bugs.

"Jesus Christ, more of this?!" Steve called out with frustration, his last nerve sounding frayed as he continued to work on the ropes without hesitation. "You can keep trying to scare me but it's not going stop me from trying to help you. Which is *what I'm doing*, by the way! I just had the other guy sick a fucking Demogorgon on me, so no offense lady, but at this point your bugs are pretty weak. So save your energy and just let me get you the hell out of here."

Kali's eyes were wide with surprise at Steve's outburst. The bugs disappeared immediately.

"Who the hell are you?" Kali asked with some air of fascination.

"I'm Steve. I'm with El," he said simply without looking up as he continued to saw through the ropes. "You already know Mike."

"It's really me," Mike reassured her as he caught her eye again, "I'm the one who's going to get you a fake ID, remember? There's no way anybody in his lab knows about that. We're here to get you out. Sev's here, too. Right behind us."

"Damn..." was all Kali could say as she finally stopped fighting them and her first arm came free from the ropes.

"Wheeler," Steve barked in command as he stood up, bent over her, and began to work on her far arm. "Radio Hopper that we have the girls."

"Hopper? Like – " Kali gasped.

"Oh! Right!" Mike exclaimed. He fumbled for his walkie talkie as he turned around to check on Sev. He had just pulled it up to type in the

morse code when his eyes fell on the girl.

Mike froze.

Sev's eyes were dropped shut in a way he didn't recognize. A pure fear was splashed across her features. He crossed back to her quickly, dropped to his knees, and began to shake her shoulders.

"Sev?! Sev what's happening? Are you – "

But his words were interrupted as the door to the room burst open.

A guard stood in the threshold, a look of pure shock on his face.

"What the hell is this?!" he cried.

Mike pulled Sev against him on instinct, her eyes still rolled into the back of her head, as he fought to pull his rifle around from his back and remembered with a crash of dread that it had been ripped from him in the last room.

Steve was simply frozen, totally caught off guard, knife in hand.

The man in the doorway pulled his gun.

Kali however, was faster. Without hesitation and with a speed that Mike never could have guessed, she pulled Steve's gun from his hip holster as he bent over her, instantly pulled the safety, and sent a bullet straight into the man's chest.

The guard fell to the ground in an instant as blood bloomed in a splash through the air.

"Holy shit!" Steve cried, his eyes bugging out, the knife shaking in his hand so badly he was likely to drop it. "You just killed that guy!"

"Of course I killed him!" she bit back easily as she pulled the small gun to her chest. "You expected him not to kill *us*? Plus, he's been pumping me with syringes for days. He can rot in hell. Now, keep untying me, Steve."

Steve nodded abruptly and obeyed as quickly as he could.

Sev quivered against Mike.

"El" she whispered into his ear.

"What?" Mike replied as he jumped, forgetting in the insane commotion that Sev had been in a trance against his shoulder.

"El..." she repeated, shaking, fear coursing through her eyes. "Bad... bad..."

An icy jolt rocked his gut and, without warning, something primal took hold of his actions. "Can you take me there?"

Sev nodded.

Mike scooped the girl from the floor and unleashed his handgun from his holster as he jumped over the body in the middle of the room and dashed to the door. "Steve, you need to radio Hopper about the girls and get Kali out of here. She can keep you both hidden. I – I have to go!"

"Oh, hell no!" Steve whipped back in surprise. "You're not going anywhere! – "

But his voice faded off as Mike entered the hall and ran faster than he had ever run in his life, a small powder keg of a girl in his arms, whispering him the way.

He had no idea what he was doing. Where he was going. What he would find. What he was going to do. He just knew that no matter how fast he ran, it didn't feel fast enough.

It would never feel fast enough.

El was in trouble.

---

"...Seventeen and I have had a long talk," Brenner said as El's eyes slipped back open.

She felt the copper tang of blood pooling into her mouth. The communication with Sev had cost her so much more energy than she

had ever lost in the Void. She worked to save her energy and controlled her instinctual push against the vice grip on her body.

Brenner's voice began to echo once again through her ears. He was still pacing as he spoke.

"We've come to an understanding. She will be staying here. I imagine you came in an attempt to retrieve her, so I'm sorry to impart to you the bad news. But," he added, turning to her and looking directly down on her once again. "I'd like to offer you an alternative."

"I understand that you know Eight well. She is, how do we say this, a bit on the difficult side," he said delicately. "I'd like your help with that. I'm unsure if you're aware, but one of our original Projects was just killed in the hallway. I must say I'm quite devastated by what just occurred to Four. They were a powerful asset. Eight, however, contains many of his powers. And with her back in the midst I'm confident we won't lose any ground."

Brenner neared closer to her then. He came to his knees as he looked her in the eye with a softness she remembered. A softness she knew was a lie.

"The two of you could work together," he said. "Work with Seventeen, work with us. It would be like... a family. A family that could create amazing things. This is a good place, Eleven. I know you've been on the run. I know it has been a hard life for you. This could be a home for you again."

A fire rod of anger writhed within her at his words.

Family.

Home.

The man who stood before her had taken away her family.

He had taken away her home.

Again and again.

Renewed grief pooled in her gut as she thought about the cries she

heard as the ceiling fell in the hallway.

In response, her power bucked with renewed force against the chains. She saw One shake, his face showing deep signs of wear. For the first time, she felt the hold upon her shake in reply.

But before she could do anything else, a beeping sound overtook the room, coming from her walkie talkie.

- · -

. . .

K.

And S.

Her sisters. Her family. They had been found. By... someone.

El's heart expanded, and with it, a reserve of energy erupted up in her body.

She broke through the chains.

---

"Here..." Sev breathed in his ear as they turned like a corkscrew to the right. Mike's feet came to an abrupt and shocked stop.

The hallway they entered was decimated.

The concrete rubble of the fallen ceiling stood in their way like a small mountain. He could see through the walls around them, the interior pipes and tubes visible behind the exploded bricks. The lights hung in flickering disarray, warped and mangled by whatever had taken place here.

He pulled the girl tighter to his chest, cursing frantically as he tried to maneuver through the ruins as quickly as he could.

Sev gasped and clutched him tighter. "Mike...?" she breathed shakily as she pointed to her left.

His eyes fell to the floor and onto a man's arm. 004 tattooed upon the forearm.

"Do you..." Mike breathed trepidatiously, holding her tighter as he slowed. "Do you know who that is...?"

"Yes. Uncle Four. He was...bad too."

"Okay," Mike replied, moving further away from the dead body that the small child in his arms recognized. "Let's – "

"...Wheeler..."

The voice was faint and wavering, but so recognizable that Mike stopped dead in his tracks.

Heart pounding with renewed force in his chest, Mike's eyes darted over the rubble for the source. A pair of boots stuck out from the what had once been a doorway, ten feet ahead. They were boots he had seen so many times in his life.

Hopper. Beneath the concrete.

Mike set Sev down without warning as he jumped over the debris toward the boots.

"Hop?!" he called in a frantic ice cold panic.

"Yep, I'm here," Hopper groaned back.

Mike followed his voice and made his way the final few feet around the grey dusted ruins. Finally, he craned around a large corner chunk of wall to find Hopper, concealed in dust from the waist up, his legs completely pinned in a way that made Mike queasy.

Mike crawled to Hopper on his hands and knees.

"Are you... can you..."

"Well, I'm not dead," Hopper croaked darkly.

"We have to get you out of this," Mike said quickly. He called over his



shoulder. "Sev?!"

Sev crawled over to him, making easy work of the grey boulders and mangled steel beams, her eyes wide and confused.

"Sev, this is Hop, he's El's dad. He's helping us. Can you get this off of him?"

"Hey kid," Hopper interjected with a grimace as the small girl's eyes fell on the older man's dusted and pained face.

Sev took a look around the carnage, weighing it out in her mind. She nodded as she wiped a fresh stream of blood from her nose.

She stepped back, out of the piles, and lifted her hand.

Mike scrambled to her on instinct and watched in awe as the grey crumbled concrete lifted from Hopper's legs. Hopper winced and bit back a string of curses as he was relieved of the pressure.

"Hop," Mike said shakily as the rubble floated in the air above them. "Are you okay?"

"Broken leg. Really broken. I'm lucky to be alive. I wouldn't have survived if El hadn't... El – "

But his words died in this throat. For, at that moment, echoing boot steps sprang into the hallway.

Frozen like a deer in headlights, Mike spun around to find six men in full rushing toward them without hesitation.

Everything flashed before his eyes as their rifles raised in his direction.

But before any of them could fire, a guttural scream cut through the air. And with it, the remains of ceiling, still floating in the air, flung with the force of a jet plane toward the throng of men.

The entirety of a concrete wall smashed into the six men. Screams echoed, but it did not stop Sev as she stalked to them, stopped dead in her tracks, and put her hand out in front of her, her small frame

rigid and tight.

Mike watched in helpless shock as Sev unleashed her power on the crushed men, ensuring that they would not be able to cause them any harm.

"Holy shit..." Hopper's voice breathed beside him.

Mike jumped up from the newly cleared floor and ran to the girl.

She wavered in the hallway in the midst of the bodies. Her blue eyes were dim and were crossing dangerously as she looked up at him. Blood was now spilling from both of her nostrils.

Mike scooped her up right before she fell.

There was no strength left in the girl. She had used everything she had in order to save him and Hopper.

Mike pulled the girl from the floor and ran back to where Hopper lay, his feet moving as fast as they could take him. He brought her to Hopper's side and leaned her beside his thick frame against the ruins of the wall.

"Sev," he said insistently. "If more bad men come, just hide you and Hopper. Don't try to fight if you don't have to. Just... just hide. Okay?"

"Yes..." she croaked as she let her head fall back against the cracked wall.

Mike swallowed hard, the reality of what he had to do next dawning on him. "I'll... I'll get El. Where is she?"

Sev and Hopper both pointed to the hallway twenty feet off to the left.

And with that, without any more hesitation, Mike stood up, turned on his heel, and ran. He jumped over the rubble and the bodies and darted, unconcealed, alone, with nothing more than a single handgun, around the corner and into the hall where El had been taken.

---

El burst through One's hold in full on her third try. He had weakened considerably, and had slipped just long enough for her mind to wrestle back the switch.

Despite the fact that every bone in her body ached like death. Despite the fact that she knew blood was leaking out of her ears. Despite the fact that she was on her last reserves of energy. She fought with everything she had.

She felt her body jolt to her feet as her hands struck forward.

The lights flared bright and the equipment in the room screeched as it fried.

One stumbled to his knees.

"Eleven, listen to – "

"NO!" She cried, wanting with all of her might to train her power on Brenner, who had pulled away, back against the wall, as far as possible from One. She knew with completely surety, though, that if she tried to revert her energy from One she would lose her grip and he would reclaim her.

So instead, she attacked Brenner only with her words.

"You are NOT FAMILY!" She bellowed as she watched One writhe on his knees, resolutely not speaking to him. "This is NOT HOME!"

She struck with another round of force.

One fell forward, his pock marked face smashing into the ground as El's body began to writhe under the pressure.

Brenner simply sighed. He came back into her view as he walked toward One. One pushed up onto his elbows, fighting against her with seething eyes as she tried to learn on the spot, with no adept knowledge, how to cancel his full power. He was unlike any of the Projects she had met in the Philadelphia lab. He was infinitely stronger.

"Eleven," Brenner said, addressing her directly, his hands behind his back. "What are you doing out there in the world? What do you ever think you can accomplish? You have no name. You have no identity. You can't build a life."

El felt her hands shake as his words twisted her insides. Brenner quickly turned to One in a flurry of movement, leaning down for the quickest moment, before he pulled back and turned to her.

"You're wasting your potential, Eleven. Here, you could have all of it. Control. Growth. Power. I have so much more to offer you now that you're an adult. And I would very much like to give all of that to you."

A syringe, emptied, was in his hand as he neared her.

"You're still fighting," He said. "I urge you to stop. Now. It is not going to go well for you."

Before his voice had even stopped, One's body became rigid.

One, eyes suddenly blazing with renewed intensity, shot a horrendously powerful surge of energy toward El, effectively rendering her dwindling strength useless, clashing with her powers in a way that ricocheted all the way up to the ceiling two stories above.

The whole room shook. Dust rained from above.

And El... was back on the floor, back in One's chemically renewed clutches, hardly able to do anything more than breathe.

---

"You are NOT FAMILY! This is NOT HOME!"

Mike's breath caught spectacularly and his heart jumped with hope as her voice erupted, muffled yet booming, through the closed doors at the end of the hallway. Raw deadly power was present in the air, stronger than he had felt at any moment other than the night she had disappeared that very first time, so many years ago.

He pulled himself against the wall, making himself as small as possible as he neared the doors step by step, his gun sliding in his

sweaty grip.

Another voice spoke in words that he could not hear, but his blood ran cold as he recognized it from the furthest reaches of his mind.

He continued his slide against the wall, closer and closer yet to the doors, when suddenly a surge of force exploded in the room on the other side.

It blasted out into the hall, knocking him on his knees as one of the two doors at the end of the hall ripped off of its hinges.

Mike overrode his shock and crawled the rest of the way, his adrenaline pumping anew.

That was when he saw her.

El was splayed on the ground, thirty feet from where he lay. She looked like death. Her eyes were wide, frozen. Blood covered her entire face, more than he had ever seen. Her body was shaking and writhing in a way he had never seen.

He did not understand what was happening, but it was clear that, whatever it was, she was losing.

Near her, too far near her, in an unmussed lab coat and perfect hair, stood Martin Brenner.

On instinct, Mike trained his gun on the man.

But at that moment, El pushed back hard, and in reply a man on the other side of the room, one that Mike did not recognize, shook violently.

The man pushed back with just as much force, a grunt flying from his mouth, and El's body shook.

Mike's gun trained off of Brenner and onto the man who controlled her.

This could not be happening.

Not to the girl who was all raw power and beauty, every ounce of it on display from the moment he had found her in the stormy woods. Not to the girl who had sacrificed herself to save him and everyone he loved, time and again. Not to the girl he had dreamed about for a year, for years upon years, in her absences. Not to the girl who had been his first kiss, his first and only love. Not to the girl with the softest chocolate hair and the sweetest most innocent dimples he had ever seen.

Not to the girl he had just found again, the girl he had just fallen in love with again, the girl he had promised to take home.

Mike was just a boy. Mortal. Equipped with nothing but a hand-me-down gun and a chip on his shoulder. He was a simple human who would have been dead three times in the past half hour if not for the protection of a ten-year-old child.

He was wholly unprepared. Yet, despite all of that, here he was. He was her only option.

He would have to be enough.

Mike's hands tightened around his gun as he crawled up onto his knees in the shadow of the decimated door and pointed toward the temple of the man who held El in the clutches of his powerful mind. He had one shot. One shot before the man with enough power to lay El Hopper out flat knew his position, knew he was a target, knew he had a threat.

One shot, or he'd die.

"Steady..."

He lined up the scope just like Jim Hopper had taught him to do to a soda can behind the cabin so many years ago...

...and pulled the trigger.

---

**Notes for the Chapter:**

brb finishing the next chapter as fast as humanely possible. Where we at, friends?

## 21. Chapter 21

### Notes for the Chapter:

Hello!! If you have the time, I truly recommend going back and starting at least at the last few segments of the last chapter. We pick up RIGHT where we left off and that was at a... kind of intense spot.

And now...

### THE LAB, PART THREE

The only reality she knew was pain.

It tore through her veins with electric charged precision, plunged cold knives into her chest, and wiped her brain to a blank black slate.

Far off, from the furthest reaches of her mind, she could hear a faint receding whisper. It screamed as it faded away. Begging her to push back. Begging her to fight.

For the first time in her life she could not give it what it asked...

... for she had nothing left.

Robbed of their power, her heavy limbs went slack within One's invisible restraints. Vision faded as her eyes lulled and crossed. She slipped and spiraled. Down. Down. Down. Toward a thickening darkness.

She hardly registered his shadow as it fell over her... as he leaned down...

"...not much longer, Eleven... need to rest... to take away the pain..."

Tap. Tap.

...no...



His hands were cold against her arm as he rolled up her sleeve and -

***BANG!***

---

Mike's body jolted as the bullet cut from his gun. He held his breath for what felt like both a split second and an eternity as it seared through the air...

...and sliced directly into the man's temple.

It was a perfect shot.

Yet, Mike breathed no sigh of relief.

For, the slain man still had the final say.

Eyes wide in horror, Mike watched as the man's lifeless body lifted spectacularly from the ground. His arms splayed and his chest expanded as a torrent of unfocused energy exploded from his body like a bomb. A final mighty release of telekinetic power crashed into the walls, broke through the ceiling and shook the ground with the intensity of an earthquake.

The force hit Mike from the side, shocking him senseless as he blew off his knees and flew down the hallway, his gun cascading from his hands before he landed hard on his side ten feet back.

He didn't even take a moment to breathe.

Up on his feet without delay, Mike scrambled for his gun. Its shining silver reflected beneath the violently pulsating lights, half buried in a small pile of fresh rubble.

He snatched it up, turned on his heel, and ran.

Through the erupted doorway.

Into the cavernous lab.

The lab had descended into shadow. Only a few lights remained, flickering like strobes, playing tricks on his eyes in the darkness. Dust

and rubble rained from the ceiling in dangerous torrents. The support beams strained audibly from above, their scraping creaks resounding in an ominous echo all around him as he moved.

Mike whipped around the room, gun tight in his grip. Panicked desperation arrested his body, doubling by the second as she continued to remain hidden from view.

Finally, after almost a full lap around the lab, a light flickered off of a thick black combat boot.

She laid in shadow, fifteen feet from where she had been before the blast. Her body was curled lifelessly against the side of an exposed metal staircase that rose up at the edge of the room.

"EL!"

Without a thought, he ran to her. His long legs made quick work of the large gap between them as he leaped over the rubble and skidded across the dust to -

***CRACK!***

"SHIIIT!"

A support beam gave way. The ceiling opened up above him in a deafening snap. He dove, tripping over his feet as he did so. His gun careened from his hand as he hit the ground hard. Without a thought, he scrambled toward El on his hands and knees. He pulled her body roughly against his and rolled, sliding them along the tiles until they tumbled in a tangle of limbs beneath a recessed gap under the staircase.

Just in time.

The floor shook violently as an anvil sized chunk of concrete crashed into the spot where Mike had been standing just seconds before. Mike stiffened on impact, his body wrapped over El's limp form like a barrier as shrapnel rained down upon him.

He could feel sharp bites of pain as bits broke through his clothing and cut into his skin, but he paid it no mind.

Instead, he looked down, El finally in his arms.

A single light flickered over her red stained face.

"El...? EL!"

Mike's stomach plummeted at the sight of her. She looked so much worse up close. Blood was caked in a sheet across her skin, sourced from her nose, her ears, and a jagged open cut across her cheek. It was dreadfully smeared from actions that seemed beyond her control. Her blonde wig had been torn off, still attached only by a few strands stuck within with her drying blood. The veins throughout her entire face looked fit to burst. Her closed eyes looked battered. Black and blue and sunken in a way that triggered his worst fears.

"El?" Mike repeated insistently as he shook her.

She did not respond.

"EL!"

"Step away from the girl."

The words hit Mike like a cold knife in the back, their intrusion an insult he was not willing to endure.

Mike's face froze to a hard mask. Every muscle in his body tightened.

He slowly looked over his shoulder.

Dr. Martin Brenner stepped forward from the shadows on a limp, into a pulsating beam of light about ten feet away. Blood seeped down his face from a head wound. It matted his silver hair and dripped into a pooling stain upon the shoulder of his white lab coat.

Yet, despite his injuries from the blast, he stood firm...

...as he pointed Mike's discarded gun squarely in Mike's direction.

"Michael," Dr. Brenner said with a procedural coldness. He took a step closer as the gun tightened in his hand. "Step away from the girl."

Mike's arms clutched around El's body in a primal surge of protection. His breath became shallow and harsh. His eyes burned with compounding red hot rage.

He did not see the barrel of the gun.

He only saw the man who had ruined her life.

Mike jaw clenched as pain coursed through him.

Not his pain.

Hers.

As though he had leeches it from her body, a lifetime of her screaming anguish bloomed full and bright and vibrant through his veins as he laid under the gaze of the man who had caused it. It overwhelmed him, so deep, so terrifyingly real, that it felt as though he had lived it himself.

Every year. Every day. Every single cursed breath.

Without blinking, Mike looked into the eyes of the man who had stolen her from her mother's womb, who had raised her like an animal, who had cursed her to a life in the shadows, and who had rendered her almost lifeless, at this very moment, within his arms.

Righteous in its purity, stunning in depth, fury broke through Mike like a wildfire.

"You want her?!" Mike yelled, guttural and unbound as he held her even tighter, his voice a cold black threat. "You'll have to kill me first."

"Michael," Brenner sighed, his tone containing a mundane frustration as though he had simply had a bad day. "Listen to me. It - "

"FUCK YOU! You listen to ME!"

Mike jumped to his feet. He rose to his full height and stood sentry over her as a shield.

"What do you think you're going to get out of this, huh?" Mike sneered, his words coming faster than his lips could move. "Nothing! That's what. NOTHING! She will *never* come back to you. I don't care how many lobotomies you try or whatever other fucked up plan you have, she will *never* give you another *second* of her life. She's not your fucking science experiment! Do you understand me?!"

With no weapons other than his hands and a decade of pent up rage, Mike advanced forward toward the man holding the gun.

"You stole her life you piece of shit!"

Brenner took a step back. His eyes widened ever so slightly. "Michael, trust me. You do not want to do this."

"Oh! You have no idea HOW MUCH I want to do this!" Mike howled, his voice so loud it cracked against the handprint of bruises on his neck. He threw his hands in the air as he advanced another step. "Do you think you can actually get me to *walk away from her*?! I would never leave her here! NEVER! I have been strangled - I've been shot at - I just killed your fucking telekinetic monster over there just so I could get into this fucking room! I am NOT leaving her! Do you understand? Do you understand that I LOVE HER!?" he screamed, his throat ripping with passion as he manically pointed back to her in the shadows. "I LOVE HER! Do you have any idea what that means?!"

"Michael... be - "

"No! You don't! Of course you don't know what that means!" Mike continued without interruption. "You're too much of a fucking sociopath to understand. It means I would do *anything* for her." Mike took another resolute step forward, adrenalin leading his every move. "ANYTHING!"

Brenner seemed to waver on his feet. The blood rushing from his head trickled with more thickness than before. He held the gun with renewed intensity directly at Mike's chest. "Michael, walk away. This is my final warning."

"Like you could pull the trigger, you *coward*!" Mike cried, his eyes bulging in a dare, sense long gone as he raved, now only six feet from

the gun in the air. He took another step forward. "What are you going to do?! All your little science experiments are gone! No one's here to kill me for you! Do you even know how to use a gun, YOU PIECE OF SHIT?!"

A click sounded through the room as the Martin Brenner's finger cocked the hammer of Mike's gun.

"Michael..."

Staring down the barrel, the bullet prepped and ready, just feet away, Mike swallowed hard.

Every pain in his body suddenly screamed in a vibrant and dizzying sensation of life.

Mike sneered. He steeled his nerves one final time. His voice turned to ice.

"Take her over my dead body."

He raised onto the balls of his feet and dove forward, arms out toward the -

***BANG!***

---

His body falling to the ground was the last thing she saw as her eyes glazed over and she tumbled back, once again, into the darkness...

She had been gone, so far gone. Swimming in the black, past the point of pain. But he had called to her, his voice repeating her first real name like a beacon through the spinning haze. It had started with tickles of warmth, prickling across her as she cascaded through emptiness, reminding her of the vague sensations that awaited her back in the reality she had left.

His voice echoed again and again, each utterance beaming a dim light through the tunnel that had taken hold of her.

The screaming came next, cold and harsh, warbling through her mind, assaulting her senses, the shouts so real and so fierce that she

could not rest.

One by one, words gained meaning. Out of context. A mash and ramble of fire and ice.

But it was him.

... *mike*...

She clung to his voice, to the passion it contained, and followed its path, up through the nothing... up through the black... up through the grey...

...until her eyes eased opened and she arrived, dazed and confused, under a flashing beam of light, her body splayed upon the ground.

Powerless on the floor, still surely stuck in One's trap, she did not try to move.

She could hear him clearly now.

Mike.

His wrath, his reverie, and his rage caused something nameless to burn within her chest. His black Converse bounced upon the floor as his words ripped from him, unbidden, toward a source she could not trace.

Finally, across the way, her eye caught the silver. It was suspended in the air, gleaming bright in the flickering lights.

It connected to hands...

to arms...

to *Papa*...

Her stomach flipped with a frail jolt as the gears inside of her mind began to turn for the first time. She struggled to connect the dots, to understand, to move...

...she felt her arm move...

*Click.*

The dots connected.

*" take her over my head fucking body! "*

NO.

**BANG!**

She could feel it as the silver hammer struck.

She could feel it as it left the barrel. Fast and hot and deadly as it entered the air.

She could feel the bullet cut the route directly toward Mike's chest.

**NO.**

So weak she could hardly breath, El tried to grasp onto the ruined and decimated threads of her power.

With more struggle than she had ever felt in her life, she tried to push.

She tried to push.

She tried to push.

She... latched.

In a single feeble spark of power, El ensnared the bullet as it cut through the air and blasted it backwards from whence it came.

Away from the man she loved...

...And straight into the forehead of the man she had once called Papa.

Depleted, ravaged, with truly nothing left, her vision faded to black... as Papa's body hit the floor...

---



Dr. Martin Brenner fell without ceremony. It was an instant loss of life, as though existence had simply disappeared from his body. The gun slipped first. It clacked against the floor as the man's legs wavered, buckled, and dropped, his eyelids still open as the light behind them extinguished forever. Red leaked from a clean cut hole at the center of the man's forehead, pooled down his eyebrow, and dripped to the floor.

Alone in the center of the decimated lab, Mike watched in stunned silence.

His body began to shake. Slowly, his fingers crawled to his chest, inching toward to the location where he swore he would find an open wound. Instead, he found the rise and fall of his lungs and the uninterrupted beat of his heart.

Racing. Heavy.

Alive...

Mike turned around slowly in reeling understanding.

"El?"

She did not reply.

She laid limp, her eyes still closed...

...her arm reached out toward him.

He moved to her in a daze, stumbling over his feet, his brain stunned too far for comprehension. He almost fell down beside her.

Her face was slack and vacant. Fresh blood ran in a torrent from her nose.

"El?" he called again, shaking her hard.

She did not stir.

The ceiling above creaked again in dire warning.

At a loss for what to do, his chest still screaming in phantom pain, Mike scooped El's body from the floor. A stamp of shock arrested his entire mind as he cradled her close and ran, away from the decimated and crumbling lab, through the halls, and back to where her father laid injured within the rubble of the second hall.

Hopper's eyes burned with worry as Mike rounded the corner, but he did not speak. Mike skidded to a quick stop as he reached him and Sev. He lowered her into the dust upon the floor with as much care as his shaking arms could muster. Frantically, he moved to check for her pulse. His fingers grew sticky with her blood loss as they pressed into her neck.

Her heartbeat was faint and slow...

...yet present against his touch.

"She's alive," he announced as he exhaled hard. His eyes dropped shut as relief washed over him.

"Some bad shit just had to happen for you not to know if *Jane* was alive..." a nervous female voice stated from behind him.

Mike spun around just as Kali and Steve appeared in a pop into view, guns at the ready in both of their hands. Steve's coat was draped over Kali's shoulders, covering her paper thin hospital gown.

"Fuck..." Kali breathed as looked down on El. She absentmindedly wiped blood from her nose onto Steve's coat sleeve. "She looks like hell..."

"Holy shit, Hop – " Steve called as he passed Kali and Mike and rushed to the older man beside the rubble. "What happened to you?! -"

" - What happened to her?" Kali asked as dropped to the floor beside him.

"Uh..."

"Just tell me who's dead," Kali cut in, relieving him of the need for details as she began to wipe the blood from El's nose with the hem of

her hospital gown.

"All – All of them." Mike stuttered, mentally counting the bodies for the first time. "I saw... all of them."

Kali's face whipped to him in surprise. Her eyes narrowed. "What do you mean... all of them?"

"Three projects," Mike spoke through trembling lips. "And - and Brenner."

Kali's jaw fell open in spectacular awe. "Holy shit."

"Yeah..."

"Holy shit..." she repeated to herself. Her breaths became short as a dumbstruck smile spread across her face. "How did – "

"Can we talk about that later?" Mike asked desperately as he leaned back down toward El.

"Yeah," Kali agreed quickly as she tugged El's wig from her head, prying it strand by strand from where it was stuck with blood, and pocketed it within Steve's coat. "We've gotta move. Steve said you still had computer stuff to do, is that true?"

"Oh shit!"

Comprehension cut through Mike at Kali's words. The mere existence of computers had been lost to him throughout the whole ordeal.

He nodded. "Yeah. Yes. We need to do that."

Kali nodded in reply. She tightened Steve's handgun into her grip and turned over her shoulder without delay. "Steve," she commanded clearly. Her voice took on an air of command that made Mike feel instantly relieved of duty. "Take Sev and Jane's father to the car. Sev, dear? I need you to keep them hidden and safe, okay? Mike and I have to handle this 'computer stuff'. We'll meet you out there."

"On it," Steve nodded in reply, his eyes wide and worried as he continued to help a groaning and immobile Hopper from the floor.

Mike leaned down to lift El, but stopped as he caught Sev's eye in the commotion. She looked over to the men and back at Mike with trepidation.

Understanding instantly, he waved her over.

Mike unzipped his black puffy coat as she neared him. "Here," he said. He wrapped it around her and helped feed her arms through the sleeves. "Just in case you get outside and have to wait. It's cold out."

"I – " she stuttered, looking over her shoulder once again with worry.

Mike steadied his voice as best he could as he zipped the coat onto her. "You've got to trust me, okay? You'll be safe with them. And you can keep them safe, too. Just – just stay hidden, okay? Just like before. I'll be right behind you. I promise."

Sev stared at Mike for a moment, her blue eyes nervous as she fidgeted within the oversized coat. Finally, she nodded.

"We'll be right behind you," Mike repeated in reassurance.

"- Mike, we've gotta go" Kali interrupted, back on her feet as she pointed down the hall toward the server room.

Mike looked back at Sev quickly. She nodded to Mike understanding, her expression hesitant but committed, as she turned to join the men.

"We've gotta go - "

" - I know " Mike barked as he lifted El yet again into his arms. He pushed his cheek down against her mouth, checking for her breath as he followed Kali the first few steps down the hall. The warm air from her mouth tickled light and shallow across his face.

And like that, the hallway cleared... as six people vanished into thin air.

Kali moved swiftly through the halls without fear, leading them along the route that they both seemed to remember from the floor plans they had shared so many days before. Mike felt supremely relieved by her presence. She was cool, collected, and in control. Armed and

ready and clearly able to fight.

"Has she responded at all? Anything?" Kali asked in a whisper as they moved through a deserted hallway.

"Nothing," Mike replied nervously, holding El tighter in a subconscious response.

"Not even a groan? Or a... a twitch?"

"Nothing," Mike repeated curtly.

"She's going to be okay," Kali whispered, seeming to read his mind as they neared a turn.

Mike merely nodded, unassured, as he looked down with anxiety on El's slack and vacant features.

The shock that had frozen his mind began to crack as they weaved through the halls. He did not pay attention to the moments that they stopped, when they pressed against the walls while security guards ran this way and that, showing no knowledge of their existence. Instead, the visions spilled in, playing over and over against his will, flushing him with fresh fear as he held her tighter and watched her chest rise and fall like a lifeline to his sanity.

She had taken too much.

*He* had put her through too much.

Rage quaked in fresh waves within him. He knew it would not stop until she woke.

...if she woke...

He never thought it possible, but in that moment it was clear to him that watching Brenner die had not been enough.

Mike needed more.

...and that was when it hit him...

In Mike's first clear thought for as long as he could remember, he added one final item to his list of plans in the server room.

They finally arrived at the door of the server room only two halted stops and one close call later. Mike shifted El's body awkwardly and pulled his sleeve over his bloody fingers to code himself in on the keypad. Kali pulled the door open and held it for Mike as he shuffled inside. Kali slipped in behind them and latched the door, careful to ensure that no one had seen the door move.

"Put Jane down," Kali said quickly.

Mike followed her orders and eased El to the floor. Kali kneeled beside her and began to tend to her needs as Mike darted to the small bank of computers on his left.

The sights and sounds of the server room made Mike feel like a complete idiot. Everything the planter had created earlier had been warped, disfigured, ever so slightly out of place. The hum of the servers and the slight heat from their work called to his senses, so real in a way that had been resolutely vacant before.

He forced a series of deep breaths as he tried to gather his scrambled thoughts.

Sense memory did most to the work, for which he was extremely grateful. It didn't take long, the small list of things that needed to be done. It was only two absolutely necessary items, though each required a different pathway out into the classified server portals.

He was aided greatly by Brenner's proprietary codes still written in Sharpee along his arm.

The first task was easy. Years of scouring confidential documents had given him a natural ability to compose the necessary words. It was clean in its detail and held no emotion. It was merely a simple statement of facts.

The message was sent out across the wires. A quick confidential directive, to be disseminated with coding to all policing bodies.

It gave Mike the vaguest thread of hope.

The second task was more challenging. That wasn't a surprise. The idea was only minutes old, after all. There had been no time to prepare.

It came to him quickly enough, though. It fell cleanly from Mike's fingers as he typed with electric intensity. The words, the tone, and the blames pointed in the exact direction that the man deserved.

Dr. Martin Brenner's suicide note highlighted what a coward he was. It showcased his disdain for humanity as it spun an alternate tale of the last fateful moments. It felt like the sweetest retribution, to steal the man's narrative and twist it back upon him, just as Brenner himself had done to so many ruined lives. It was all so easily explained away. The dead bodies across the lab, ended by his bidding. The bullet in the skull of the final telekinetic experiment. And finally, the second bullet lodged, by Brenner's own finger on the trigger, within his own skull.

Eyes moving fast as time ticked away, he proofread the missive. Satisfied, he sent it through the confidential wires with a few simple clicks.

He pulled up the hem of his hoodie and wiped the keyboard clean of his fingerprints.

A vindictive smile crossed Mike's lips as he began to turn back to the girl.

"Kali, I'm done. I - "

He stopped as he spotted Kali and El on the floor.

Three vibrant blue butterflies glowed in the dark. They spun softly over El's head as she laid unconscious in Kali's lap.

"They're Jane's favorite," Kali said quietly as she looked up and caught Mike's eye, a tear on her cheek as she licked the hem of the coat sleeve and continued to wipe dried blood from El's chin. "They always make her feel better when she's not okay. I just thought – I don't know..."

"They're beautiful..."

The butterflies illuminated El's features in a dazzlingly soft blue as they hovered over her. Even in her most ruined moment, bruised and unconscious with injuries Mike could not discern, she was utterly perfect.

"Has she... Anything?" he asked.

Kali shook her head. "Not yet."

Mike's heart plummeted as Kali sniffed and directed her attention to the server racks. "What are these? I've never seen machines like this before."

"It's the files. Basically, they're in the metal casings. I've been in this room a hundred times," Mike said with a dark huff, "but only through the wires."

"So..." Kali started, eyeing the server racks as thoughts began to move fast behind her eyes. "All that stuff you showed us. You stole it from – from here? From inside these things?"

"Most of it, yeah."

Kali nodded, smacked her lips, and turned her eyes to Mike with an instant and fiery conviction.

The butterflies vanished.

"I want it gone."

Mike blinked.

The thought was so destructive... so devastating... so intensely permanent.

"Alright..." Mike smirked. "Let's burn it to the ground."

It took some quick thinking, but Mike finally found two live wires. With a simple spark, he held them against the exposed opening on the back of the first server. They spit and cracked until smoke finally started to rise.



Mike stepped back, a morbid satisfaction dawning over him as the first flames began to rise.

"Why didn't I think of this?"

"I'd say you're too vanilla to think of something so destructive," Kali replied with a deadpan tone, "but I'm pretty sure you killed a man tonight, so I don't know what to think anymore."

Mike eyed her from the side.

"Yeah. I did," he replied simply, without a single shred of regret. "Let's go."

The caustic smell of melting plastic began to clog the air as Mike hoisted El's body into his aching arms one final time. It burned against his throat, reminding him of the choking pain he still felt. He pushed it aside and quickly motioned for Kali to lead the way from the room.

Kali closed the door fast once they were out, trapping the smoke in order to delay the alarms. Then, nothing else standing in their way, they broke out into a full run, Mike whispering the directions to the exit door.

They were two hallways away when the fire alarms screeched to life.

Undeterred and sparked with a new burst of adrenalin, Mike's arms shifted to get a better grip on El as he began to run faster. Kali followed suit. She struck out in front of him, leading the way under the covers of both her invisibility and her gun.

Security guards began appearing more and more as they tore through the final hallways, running this way and that, flying past Kali, Mike and El as though they were nothing more than air.

Kali wiped her nose on Steve's coat once again, her feet faltering for the first time, as they rounded in a frenzy into the final hallway.

The original doors of their entrance came into view.

Halfway down the long hall, they appeared like a vision.

A simple flicker in and a simple flicker out.

Sev, leaning against the wall near Steve and a leaning Hopper.

Kali had seemed to see it too, because they both began to move faster at the same time, the final door becoming closer and closer...

...until that very door slammed open in a sudden burst.

"To the back at the left!" A fireman yelled as he led the charge through the door.

Mike's hacked security controls had finally been overridden just as they were about to leave.

Kali jumped in surprise only fifteen feet away from the door. She held her hand out for Mike to stop. They eased their way as slowly as they could toward the wall.

Seven men followed behind the first, each dressed in full fire gear. They rushed by, their attention clearly upon the fire deeper inside the building. The six unseen perpetrators watched them go as their boot steps echoed away around the corner.

Cold crisp air cut across Mike's cheek. His eye shot to the doors... to where the fire unit had pinned the exit open for the ease of their emergency work.

Kali and Mike shared a look before she nodded and led the way, silently beckoning for Steve to follow as she grabbed Sev's hand.

"We're almost out," Mike whispered reassuringly against El's ear as he fell in step behind Kali and Sev, Steve behind him as he whispered reassurances to an increasingly weak Hopper.

Calmly, slowly, and with the sharpest attention, they walked out of the building and into the night.

Chaos was paramount in the alleyway. Sirens erupted around them from two fire trucks. Men ran this way and that as they worked to ready their offense.

Steve grabbed Kali's sleeve and pointed her toward the direction of the SUV. Kali nodded and let him lead, her body slowing dangerously as the heavy work she had put in began to truly wear her out. Still, they moved undetected, undeterred, as though they had never been there at all.

The going was slow with Hopper's injury in the lead as he flagged against Steve. Mike's muscles began to shake violently from the stress of El's dead weight. He breathed heavily, in and out, as each step began to feel like an eternity.

Finally, they crossed the siren filled street to the parking lot beyond.

Kali and Hopper were each about to pass out upon arrival.

Kali leaned against the vehicle. Her face was ashen and ravaged, so similar to how she had looked on the fateful night they had arrived on his doorstep. It felt like a lifetime ago.

Hopper was shivering, his body going into shock as the pain of his un-splinted broken leg became too much for the strongest man Mike had ever known to handle.

One by one, Steve helped them into the car, showing a physical strength Mike wasn't aware that the man had. He hoisted Hopper the final inches into the front seat and simply lifted Kali into the back.

Sev, stronger than the rest, but still bloodied to a large degree, moved on her own, slipping into the middle of the back seat before Mike, with El tucked tight in his arms, squeezed into the too small space beside her.

Sev laid her hand on Kali's knee. "It's okay. I'm – I can hide now."

Kali simply nodded, her body going instantly slack at Sev's words as she let her head fall against the window.

Mike watched Sev in grateful awe as her eyes dropped shut. She simply sat there, calm and casual, as she obscured them from view with an illusion he could only imagine.

Steve crawled into the driver's seat and glanced with worry over to

Hopper.

"Hop, we need to get you to the – "

"Just... drive... " Hopper spit through chattering teeth. "Get us out of New... York..."

"Can we - ?" Steve stuttered, looking back.

"No one can see," Sev said simply. "Go."

The engine roared to life.

Tires crunched against ice as Steve pulled out of the parking lot, away from the lab, and through the snowy streets. He steered the vehicle toward the Holland Tunnel, just a few blocks away, and drove them off of the island of Manhattan.

The lights of the tunnel bounced off of El's face as Mike held her in the tight and cramped seat. Her cheek was almost pressed against his. Her faint breath grazed his nose.

It felt like the most important feeling in the world.

He gathered the courage to try.

"El?" he whispered finally. He brushed a few stray frizzes from her forehead where they had escaped their pins. "Can you hear me?"

She did not reply.

Mike's chest clenched as he closed his eyes.

The lights disappeared as they exited the tunnel and entered into the dark night air of New Jersey.

"Steve, turn on the police scanner," Mike asked quickly as the vehicle rose from the tunnel. Steve complied.

The harsh crackle CB radio transmissions filled the vehicle. It barked boring police calls and traffic stops as the night flew past outside the window.

Mike fought off the shake that overtook his body as the minutes passed. His heartbeat had not returned to normal. He could find a breath of relief. Every mile that passed created a new paranoid vision from the corner of his eye.

He reminded himself on repeat that the security cameras had picked up nothing. That no one alive had seen them there. Not one person had seen them leave. He reminded himself that two pieces of hard evidence pointed resolutely in a different direction, typed and sent before the fire raged.

If only he could hear the proof...

Halfway across the state of New Jersey, while his legs were asleep and his mind spun in a terrified mess, he finally heard the words he needed to hear.

A woman's clear voice came across the scanner.

*Attention all units. Please be advised that active manhunt for perpetrators in case number one-one-zero-eight-one-seven has been called off. Child has been located safely. Perpetrators were misidentified. I repeat. Active manhunt for perpetrators in case number one-one-zero-eight-one-seven has been called off. Child has been located safely. Perpetrators were misidentified. Calling off all units.*

The breath Mike had been holding for hours released from his lungs in a rush.

"Guys that was it!" he yelled to the vehicle. "I wrote that. The manhunt is off."

"YES!" Steve whooped as he slammed his hand on the steering wheel. Hopper groaned in reply, his leg needing attention right away. Kali was asleep, her head lulling against the window. Sev leaned against Mike nervously, unsure of what it all meant.

Sev would have to wait for just a second, though.

Mike pulled El closer.

"El? It's done," he whispered into her ear, the scent of her hair

shaking his chest. His lips trembled with the tiniest hopeful smile. He pumped her hand hard within his. "We did it, El. It's done. You're - You're free."

...Her hand pumped his back.

"- Oh!"

Mike's heart leapt with an intensity that almost knocked him unconscious as tears, long held back, crashed unbidden from his eyes in her hair. His hand tightened around hers as he cradled her body against him.

The purest relief washed over his mind.

The SUV continued to drive, through the night, straight in the direction of home.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

You all have no idea the weight that is lifted off of my chest with the release of this chapter. I have never written anything like this plot arc before. It has just been the best, most insanely challenging and amazing creative experience. And it has been SO MUCH COOLER because I've gotten to share it with all of you! Thank you all so much for taking this crazy action ride with me!

I would adore hearing from you :)

Still two chapters left!

Next stop... home...

- L -

## 22. Chapter 22

The jostling of the truck on a gravel road awoke Mike from his light and troubled doze.

"Finally..." Hopper grumbled weakly from the front seat.

Familiar trees lined the driveway. Their bare arms were dusted in snow in the late afternoon light. A sense of relief washed over Mike at the sight.

It did not matter the season. He knew those trees without fail.

"El, we're home."

She had been nestled against his cheek for hours in their half of the cramped back seat. Her movements had been few and far between. Every so often she had rustled or moaned or buried her face deeper into his neck to hide from the light of morning. Twice throughout the mid-morning she had awoken, ever so slightly. Just long enough for Mike to get her some water and assure her that she was safe. Each time she had quickly dozed back off into the crook of his neck.

It was enough, though. Enough to put to rest the choking fear that had clawed at his chest from the moment he'd found her motionless on the floor. It was a fear that had kept him up all night. It had gnawed at his insides as he'd held her unconscious body. It was all he could think about all night, as his eyes had drifted out over the blackness of the roads as they passed by out the window.

Frankly, it had been the only safe place to look; out into the black. It was much safer than the backs of his eyelids, where endless visions played on repeat with a ferocity that made his whole body tremble. Visions that spiked every time he swallowed through the strangled pain in his neck, every time he adjusted to quell the searing sting in his shoulder blade, every breath that expanded into the space where he still swore he felt a wound... one that had never actually occurred...

Needless to say, it had been a long night.

Mike finally succumbed to his exhaustion late in the morning, but only after an emergency sojourn off of the road to attend to Hopper's deteriorating condition. It had been a stressful hour as Kali and Steve had fought over who was more equipped to reset and splint his broken leg. Hopper weakly tried and failed to control the situation, to no effect. Finally, it had been Sev who had put the debate to rest as she'd moved silently between them, placed her hands on Hopper's injury, and carefully readjusted the broken bones back into alignment without moving a muscle.

Needless to say, this had not been the best road trip of Mike's life.

But finally, they were home.

Mike gaped in surprise at the amount of cars in the driveway as Steve steered the truck into the secluded drive.

Mrs. Hopper's tiny Mazda, a wedding present from Hopper, was parked tight against the front porch. Mike knew it well. He had helped Will and Hop pick it out at the dealership a week before their wedding.

Will's hand me down Pinto, which had once been his mom's, looked sad and rusting off to the side.

Max's old white Jeep Wrangler, which they had all warned her was a terrible choice for Indiana winters, was parked off to the right. Mike was sure she had only kept it out of spite. Ever since her Junior year of high school she had driven it with pride, no matter how cold it got under the cloth top.

Dustin's wood paneled station wagon was pulled up directly behind Max's Jeep. It was so large that it had successfully fit both Mike's and Dustin's belongings on their multiple trips back and forth from Boston, all throughout their college years.

Finally, off on the side, almost in the trees, rested Hopper's police truck. The windshield was covered in snow, left behind for a heroic round trip to New York City.

Steve stopped short at the end of the drive. He sighed tiredly from



the front seat?

"Ready for the welcome committee?" he groaned.

At that moment, the front door burst open. Five people raced out at full speed and surrounded the truck.

Sev grabbed Mike's hand tight at the sight of them.

"These are friends," Mike said quietly as he squeezed her hand back. "You're safe."

"Okay...?"

Mike pulled his hand away quickly as Dustin appeared beside his door. The door beside El jerked open as Mike pulled her tight against him and held his finger to his lips to keep Dustin quiet.

Dustin nodded and then looked down at El.

"Holy shit... It's really her!" Dustin whispered, his exuberance hardly contained. "When Steve called I was sure he meant your - "

Mike rolled his eyes as he cut him off quietly. "Yeah, it's really her. She had a rough night. She's still pretty knocked out so..."

"Here, hand her to me. I'll carry her in." Dustin held out his arms. Mike nervously unraveled his hold on El's sleeping form. Dustin lifted her from the truck with care and disappeared from Mike's view in an instant.

"I'll get the doors. Follow me in!" Lucas's voice sounded from around the front of the car. The door on the other side of the car slammed quickly and before Mike knew it Kali was tight on their heels as they all moved swiftly into the house.

Commotion could be heard from the front seat where Mrs. Hopper was busy worrying over Hopper. Her voice was shaking and affirmative as she demanded Steve take them to the hospital.

Mike stiffly pulled himself out of the back seat, but before his feet even touched the ground his hand was captured by Sev's small and

shaking grip. She pulled herself close to him as she hopped out of the truck directly behind him.

A long cascade of red hair flashed from behind the truck in an instant. Max appeared, with Mike's and El's bags slung over her shoulders.

"You look like shit!" Max greeted Mike with a soft laugh as she pulled him into a tight hug. Mike seethed as she patted her hand against his shoulder.

"What the – "

"My back, it's – "

But he couldn't get a word in edgewise. Max instantly dropped the bags, peeled up his hoodie and t-shirt, and revealed his wounds to the cold afternoon air.

"Gnarly! What the fuck is this!?"

Mike grimaced as Max's fingers pulled against one of the pieces. "Concrete... um... shrapnel."

"Okay," she exclaimed with a shock laugh as she dropped his shirt and hoisted the bags back up onto her shoulders. "I have to hear what the hell happened last night. But first, we have to get this shit out of your back. It looks terrible. Come on."

But Mike didn't reply right away, because at that moment Will appeared from behind the truck. His eyes were drawn and worried. Exhaustion played on his face. His hair was disheveled and he looked like he had slept in his clothes.

"I am so happy to see you guys," Will said with sudden relief as he reached Mike and pulled him into a sudden hug. "Last Mom or I knew was that terrifying phone call you made. Then Hop just picked up and left. Are you okay?"

Mike nodded against his best friend's shoulder as he pulled back. "Yeah. Are you okay?"

"Been worse," Will said darkly as he looked down to Mike's companion. His eyes widened in surprise. "Hi there."

Will's voice softened in an instant as he knelt down beside Sev. He smiled and held out his hand in greeting. "I'm Will. I'm a friend of Mike and El's. What's your name?"

"S-Sev?" she stuttered. Her hand shook within Mike's as she pulled closer to his side.

"Are you okay? Are you tired? Hungry?" Will asked.

"Hungry..." Sev replied quietly.

"Well, luckily we have a lot of food inside," Will replied kindly. "Come on, why don't we all go in? It's cold out."

Will led the way through the array of parked cars to the front steps of the house. At that same moment, Steve's truck crunched against the gravel as it peeled back out of the driveway, Mrs. Hopper now in tow, on the way to the hospital.

Lucas and Dustin's voices could be heard from the kitchen when they entered the house.

" – knew it was really her! I told you!"

"You gotta understand! I was sure Steve was mistaking her for his – "

" – Well, you were wrong."

"I know, I'm sorry! She looks good, though! I mean, she looks terrible. But good? You know? I can't believe he found her! I – "

"Where is she?" Mike asked abruptly as he stopped in the kitchen entrance and faced his friends.

Dustin and Lucas rushed from where they stood and each pulled Mike into a hug. "Holy shit man! What happened?!" Dustin cried.

"This is crazy!" Lucas interjected.

Mike sighed, so very grateful for their presence and so very unable to find the energy to deal with them at the same time. "Can we talk about it later? I just need to know where she is."

"Her... sister? She said sister, right Lucas? Anyway, her sister kicked us out. She's in Will's bed," Dustin said with a shrug.

"Yeah, nice try, Mike. We're fixing this first," Max said firmly as she dropped the bags she'd been carrying and grabbed Mike by the elbow.

"Fix what?" Lucas asked, his brow knitted in confusion.

"Oh, you knooooow," Max said with a mock casual tone, "Mike just has shrapnel in his back. No big deal, really."

"Shrapnel?! Holy shit!"

Mike groaned as Max tugged him toward the living room. The rest of the party hurried to keep pace.

" – Dude!" Lucas cried with alarm as he pulled close to Mike and caught his arm, "What happened to your throat!?"

Mike self consciously fingered the bruises around his throat. He didn't reply. Frankly, he didn't have the strength. Their voices continued to echo around him, too loud and too sharp for his raw and exhausted senses to handle. His legs almost gave out as he reached the couch. The cushions sank beneath him, so instantly comfortable that he wished he never had to move again.

Sev tugged on his hand and brought him out of his split second of peace. She was still latched to his hand. She had not sat down. Instead, she stood in front of him, her eyes dancing with discomfort.

"Yeah?" Mike asked tiredly.

"Sisters..." she whispered as her eyes roamed around the room.

Once again, Will cut in benevolently. "Hey uh, Sev? I can show you where they are. And we can get you something to eat."

Sev looked back nervously. Mike simply nodded to her with reassurance. She seemed to get the hint. She tentatively let go of Mike's hand and followed Will from the room.

"Bring the first aid kit when you come back!" Max called as they disappeared down the hall.

"Who's the kid?" Lucas asked curiously once the coast was clear.

Dustin sat down beside Mike, his tone professorial, "She's like El, isn't she?"

Mike nodded.

"Holy shit! There's more! That's so cool!" Dustin exclaimed.

Lucas began to pace. "Okay, can you tell us anything about what the hell is going on? Clue us in here because absolutely none of this makes sense."

Mike sighed as his head dropped almost involuntarily to his hands. "Long...story."

"Yeah, no shit," Dustin quipped as he held a cup out for Mike. "Here. Drink this."

Mike took the cup gratefully and pulled it to his lips, suddenly desperate for something to drink. He drank blindly and sputtered. "Whiskey?! What the hell, Dustin?! I thought this was water!"

"I'm trying to help!" Dustin refuted insistently. "It's medicine, man. Whiskey is a natural painkiller! They used to give out prescriptions for it during Prohibition. You're going to need it. When we pull this shrapnel out it's going to hurt like hell. Drink up."

Mike sighed and rolled his eyes, but instantly took Dustin's advice. The whiskey burned with an intensity that almost made him wretch, but the relief within his muscles was almost instant. It filled him with a cooling warmth that allowed him to relax even deeper into the cushion below him.

Dustin took Mike's cup and filled it once again from a bottle of

whiskey at his feet. "Are you doing okay, man? Seems like -"

"- Of course he's not okay! He's got a concrete wall In. His. Back." Max exclaimed from Mike's other side.

"I can see that!" Dustin barked back as he handed Mike the fresh cup. "I'm checking on the state of Mike's mental health!"

"I'm okay," Mike grumbled. "Been better, but –"

"Okay, I've got tweezers, antiseptic, gauze and tape. Do we need anything else?" Will asked as he leaned down near Max and dropped the supplies into her lap.

"This'll work," Max replied quickly. "You ready for this, Wheeler?"

Mike nodded stiffly and leaned forward to allow her full access to his back.

"Is Sev okay?" Mike asked as Max's hands roughly tugged up his shirt to reveal the wound he had been ignoring for hours.

"Yeah," Will confirmed, slightly bemused. "She swiped one of Dustin's honey buns and ran off to the bedroom before I could even get a word in edgewise."

"Kid's got good taste!" Dustin said.

"Yeah, that sounds about right," Mike said with a laugh as he braved another sip of whiskey.

"OW!"

Mike almost choked on the burning liquid in his throat as searing pain shot through his shoulder from the tweezers in Max's hand.

"Just chill. You're gonna be fine," Max said casually as her fingers crawled to the next affected spot.

Mike took a deep breath to quell the queasiness coming over his stomach. She tugged yet again. His entire body flinched.

"FUUUUUUUCK! OW!"

"Oh that one was awesome!"

"You're enjoying this too much, Max!"

"Oh, totally! I'm absolutely enjoying this. This is so gross!" she said as she tugged on another shard.

"Maaaaax! OUCH!"

"I only have a couple left. It's not that bad, really. They're not deep and they're all pretty small. It's definitely starting to get infected, though," Max said. "Why the hell didn't you deal with this already?!"

"El needed help," Mike grimaced through gritted teeth as he prepared for the next pull. "And Hop. Didn't seem important..."

"The fact that you have pieces of a building stuck in your body didn't seem important?" She asked incredulously as she tugged another piece.

Mike almost screamed as tears of pain streamed down his face.

"Okay, I can't take it anymore. This is crazy!" Lucas exclaimed out of nowhere as he began to pace again. "Where the hell did you find El?!"

"Train..." was all Mike could eek out through wincing groans.

"You found her on a train... How does that lead to her being knocked out and you covered in shrapnel and bruises?" Lucas asked suspiciously. "Nothing about this story makes sense."

"We ran into each other... kinda, I mean..." Mike tried to explain. His exhaustion made it difficult to find the right words. "I guess I saw her and she saw me and then she found me, like... a week and a half ago?" he sighed. "It's be a weird couple of weeks."

"That's so romantic that you found her on the train!" Max squealed as she pulled on another piece.

"FUCK!"

"So fucking romantic!" Max cooed again, her voice light and airy despite her gruesome work. "Unless you're not...? Are you?!" she suddenly gasped. "Are you not?! Are you back to - "

"- Yeah, we are," Mike reassured her.

"Awww!" Max squealed right into his ear as she leaned in and moved her fingers over his back once again.

A smile ghosted over his lips for a split second before another ripping sting made every good feeling in his body turn into localized agony.

"OWW!"

"See, that one didn't hurt as much because you were thinking good thoughts!" Max said jovially.

"You just keep telling yourself that..." Mike whimpered as a fresh wave of tears cut down his face.

"Well, it looks like that was the last one so it's all downhill from here - "

"- Okay, so that explains how you found El, but - " Lucas said, clearly focused only on the story and not on the activities of the room. "But El looks... I mean - What the hell happened to her?!"

A haunting flash and bang sounded so loudly in the hollow between Mike's ears that he flinched. Mike swallowed hard against a triggered peak of fear, his lips unwilling to form the words he needed to answer the question.

"Long story," he stuttered. "She... she got in a fight with someone like her."

"Like HER?!" Dustin exclaimed suddenly. He bounced on his couch cushion as he turned quickly toward Mike. "Like... like a telekinetic brain battle or something?!"

Mike sighed weakly, "Can we just focus on - "

" - leave him alone, guys," Will said quietly, seeming to sense Mike's



discomfort. "The point is everybody is safe."

"Yeah, that," Mike replied gratefully. "Thanks."

"Is everybody safe, though? Or are those assholes going to come busting through the door any minute now?" Lucas asked shrewdly.

At that, Mike caught Lucas's eye and found himself able to answer with resolute surety. "No. It's done. Like, really done."

"For good?" Will asked in surprise.

"Yeah," Mike replied, relief filling him once again at the thought. "Or, as done as it ever can be. That's the only way El got to come home."

"Whoa..."

The party fell silent as a rolling sense of understanding coursed through the room. Max's hands continued their work. The searing sting of antiseptic burned across Mike's back as she cleaned out the pin prick wounds and dressed them with gauze.

Mike gazed out blearily while he waited for her to finish.

Lucas continued to pace. His brow was furrowed as he tried to piece out the tale from his disparate knowledge. Dustin was simply beside him, offering the whiskey bottle with a look of amused relief. Will was on the floor. He was leaned back against the arm of the sofa as he stared off into space.

"Hop's going to be fine," Mike said as he reached over and patted Will on the shoulder. "Is your Mom okay?"

Will nodded. "Yeah, I think she will be now. We're just happy you guys are all safe. It's been an... interesting few days here."

"I know the feeling," Mike replied sarcastically.

Will chuckled in dark understanding.

"Okay, you're all set," Max finally said. "Sleep on your left side tonight so this can breathe. And you're going to need to keep doing

antiseptic so it doesn't get too infected. It's going to be fine but you're going to have one gnarly scar."

"It'll be like a constellation of scars, really. War wounds," Dustin said as he clapped Mike on his good shoulder.

"Thanks," Mike said as he raised his head and pulled his ruined shirt back down over his body. He rose up from the couch. Every bone in his body protested as he did so. He looked around tiredly at his friends. "Thanks for being here, guys." He finally said with humble genuine thanks. "El... she's going to be really excited to you."

"I'm excited to see her!" Max said excitedly. "What the hell is she like now? Where has she been?"

"How many telekinetic brain battles has she been in?!" Dustin interjected excitedly.

"Don't ask her that, please," Mike said with a groan. "It's a touchy subject."

"But it's a subject nonetheless!"

"I'm going to go check on her," he said with a wave. "I want to be there if she wakes up."

A chorus of teasing 'awwws!' rang out from the two people that had flanked him on the couch. He shot back a weak glare.

"What!? It's cute!" Dustin refuted as Mike turned the corner into the hall.

Mike rolled his eyes, but he couldn't help but smile as his feet dragged him towards Will's bedroom.

It was more of a comfort than he ever could have imagined, to be back in this house and back with his friends after such a harrowing couple of weeks. There was such a unique normalcy to it. A shared history baked into the very walls of the house. It seemed only right that they would end up at Will's house at the end of this mad state of affairs.

He couldn't think of any place he would rather be.

Mike eased the door open to find Kali and Sev flanking El on either side of the bed. She was still fast asleep.

Kali was busy cleaning El's face of any remaining blood that Mike hadn't been able to reach while they'd been in the car. Sev had a hold on El's hand. Her eyes were closed. A small trickle of blood was collecting at the edge of her nose.

Something protective rushed through Mike at the sight.

"Kali..." Mike asked hesitantly. "What is Sev doing?"

Sev's eyes popped open. She instantly jerked her hands back before Kali could answer. Something tortured and embarrassed danced in her expression as their eyes met.

"I'm... sorry!" she squeaked.

"We're you trying to help her wake up?" Mike asked in confusion.

She was quiet for a moment, her breath jerky as she stood up. "Yes. To... talk..."

"Let's let her wake up naturally, okay?" Mike requested as patiently as he could, bemused by the girl's actions but too tired to ask any further questions.

Sev nodded with an unexpected sense of shame and crossed around the bed toward the door. "He - Your... friend? He told me I can sleep there?" Sev pointed down the hall toward Jonathan's room.

"I'll go with her," Kali said as she stood and turned to Mike. "That is, if you were planning on staying with El. I don't think we should leave her alone."

"Yeah, me either. I'll be here," Mike replied instantly, grateful that he didn't have to try to convince them to leave. "You two go get some rest."

Kali nodded in agreement. Her eyes drooped as she yawned. "You

should try to get some sleep, too. You look terrible."

Mike chuckled as he stretched, the fresh dressing on his shoulder stiff and painful as he moved. "No promises. But I'll try."

The girls exited without another word and Mike closed the door behind them.

His crossed to the far side of the bed. As slowly as he could he crawled beneath the blanket to join El, careful not to wake her or to tweak his fresh bandages.

The pillow cradled his head in a way that made him almost moan in relief. His exhaustion was beyond comprehension. He didn't care that he was still wearing dirty, blood spattered clothes. He didn't care that his neck was covered in dried sweat, or that his fingernails were still caked in concrete dust. All he wanted to do was rest.

But oddly, despite his aching need for sleep, he found that he did not want to close his eyes.

El was infinitely more comforting than any of the terrors that he feared to face behind his eyelids.

The dim lamp on the desk behind him played off of her skin in a way that made her glow, despite her injuries. Her dark hair was still pinned tightly against her head where her wig had once been. Her closed eyes were dark and puffy, smudged with remnants of makeup and tears, and marked with bruised and throbbing skin. She was uncharacteristically pale, all the way down to her light pink lips, chapped and bitten, that moved slightly when she breathed.

He swallowed thickly as he willed himself, yet again, to believe that she was real.

His fingers trembled and he held back tears as he reached out greedily to touch her cheek. She was slightly warm to the touch. Not enough for a fever, but enough for him to know that beneath her unconsciousness she was still very much alive. Slow and light, taking his time, Mike caressed her cheekbone. Down her jawline. Behind her ear. Along the line of her hair toward the nape of her neck. His heart

beat ever so slightly harder with every inch he traversed.

It had never mattered to him, the details of how she looked on any single day. How much blood she had caked beneath her nose, or how bruised the skin had become around her eyes. It had never mattered how she wore her hair or her makeup. Long, short, buzzed. Any color. All or nothing. Twelve or sixteen or twenty-three.

She. Was. Beautiful.

Maybe it was his exhaustion, or the whiskey buzz, or both, but in that moment his concept of time seemed to bend back on itself.

Almost like an apparition, she was the girl. The girl he had lost the first time when he had just been a boy. The girl he had called for 353 days. The girl who had suddenly returned. The girl who struggled through sleep in this very same bed as she recovered from a brutal fight after saving them all.

Now, just as then, a tiny perfect warrior at rest.

He hadn't understood the true meaning or depth of his feelings back then. Not in the hours he'd stood vigil beside her bed as he'd waited for her to wake, still covered in gasoline but not caring at all.

He hadn't known then. He hadn't known what it all meant.

But he knew now.

And the boy he'd been? That boy had been onto something.

It wasn't a feeling, really. It never really had been. It had always seemed more like a truth.

The pull that Mike felt to El was timeless. Unmarked by age or experience. Just as pure now as it had been that night over nine years ago.

It was love, yes. And... awe. And more.

There was no easy way to explain it, but it was as though her presence in his life had stretched him. She had challenged him, by

her sheer existence alone, to expand in every direction. To become stronger and softer at the same time.

Because no one was stronger or softer than El Hopper. She was both the brightest light and the hardest stone. Pure grit and power, with a selfless ability to make him feel so seen in the most vulnerable and accepting ways.

All he had ever hoped was that maybe, in any way that he could, he could create some semblance of that same kind of safety for her.

And now, in this bed, he touched her warm neck with the knowledge that she was really truly safe...

It felt like only the beginning of what she deserved.

Usually, Mike's brain would have jumped to the next day, and the next week, and the next year. He'd have been a frenzy of best laid plans.

But in this moment, Mike surrendered.

He let time move them forward on its chosen path, one second at a time.

Mike leaned closer, catching her scent in a way that made his eyes tear. He placed the lightest kiss to her eye and dropped his forehead against hers. His arms softly wrapped around her as he finally gave into his desperate need for rest.

---

She stirred as her body registered the pain. It was everywhere. Every bone, muscle and tendon throbbed as though she had been hit by a truck. Her consciousness was purely physical, rote, a mechanical set of creaking bones.

It wasn't until her eyes eased open that she had any questions at all.

Her vision was blurry. It was though her eyes had not processed sight in so very long. But as she began to focus, something felt... off...

She knew this place...

...It had to be a dream.

A small lamp on the desk illuminated Will Byers' bedroom in the dark of night.

A foggy serenity glazed over her. An almost revelatory awe. It was as though she was looking at it through a picture frame. Removed. Far away. She scanned the room slowly. Past the wall. Past the bookshelf in the corner. Past the movie posters and art and tacked up pictures of friends, all too blurry for her to view in detail. Past the familiar wooden headboard. To Mike.

Mike...

Mike... curled up tight like a child beside her, his hands pulled into his chest, one of her hands trapped within his curled fingers. Mike... With his soft long lashes closed against the world. With his washed out freckles that dotted his nose ever so simply. With his dark beard that ringed his slightly open lips. Mike, with a cut across his eyebrow. Mike, with tiny pinprick scrapes across the side of his cheek. Mike... with a handprint of ugly bruises painted across the whole of his throat.

El shot up in the bed as her eyes stitched wide in shock. Her breath was so short that almost fell over the second she rose.

Her limbs continued to scream their endless arc of pain.

But now, they screamed a name.

...One...

"MIKE?!"

"Wha-!?"

Mike was up and beside her in an instant, his movements so fast and terrified that he almost fell off of the bed. He was all lanky limbs and shock. His eyes were wide and stunned as they locked onto hers. Before she could process anything else, she was in his arms.

El's brain was on fire as she collapsed into this body. His heartbeat

was strong and frantic against her ear as she shook uncontrollably against him. She could hear him whispering softly and insistently in her ear, but she could not process his words. Her brain was too thick and too slow to process the barrage of fears that bloomed within her, unbound, spilling over her like an eruption. She could feel his hand against her neck, shaking along with her.

"El...El!"

She had not noticed that he had pulled her away. She had not noticed that his hands had moved to cup her cheeks. She had not noticed that his deep chocolate eyes were locked resolutely on hers.

"Breathe, El."

He felt so far away, though she could sense his hands upon her. She followed his voice and obeyed his command.

She breathed. Every single breath hurt her chest.

"Good job," he encouraged softly. He ran his thumbs comfortingly across her cheeks. "El, can you talk to me?"

"...y-yes..." she breathed.

"Oh, thank god," Mike said shakily as he...smiled.

His expression was so confusing when mixed with the terror fuel in her veins. Before she knew it his lips were against her forehead, her eyelids, her cheeks, her lips. He peppered her with a dizzying array that stopped her stunned mind in its tracks.

"You're okay. We're safe. Everyone is safe," Mike said resolutely as he pulled back and spoke to her directly, his eyes alight, his hands gripping her shoulders with firm confidence. "We're home."

The word felt odd on her lips. "...home?"

Will's bedroom came back into view. It had blended out of her knowledge once the fear had rushed in. She gasped, causing Mike to laugh.



"I don't...understand...I..." tears began to rise as her jaw shook.

"We..." Mike stuttered. His face faltered as he hesitated. "El? What's the last thing you remember?"

She choked on the question, though she knew the answer. The words felt dirty in her mouth. She forced them out in stilted stutters. Each utterance elicited physical pain. "He... he...Froze... I couldn't move? He had... control... of me? Then..." she stopped, thinking hard. Her resolve weakened with every repetitive thought. "Nothing..."

Surprise was written across Mike's features. "The man...?" he asked shakily. "What happened to him?"

"I... don't know...he's..."

Her panic crashed again as his question sunk in. She clenched his arms in terror, as though the two men might be standing directly behind her. As though this was some kind of sick and terrifying game.

"He's gone," Mike said quickly as he seemed to reach her expression. "El, I promise you. I saw him dead with my own eyes. I saw all of them. They're... they're all gone."

Her jaw went slack at his words, but she didn't comprehend them.

"...You mean - "

"I mean, they're gone. And... and he's gone. ...um... Brenner. Do you - " he hesitated. "Do you remember... that?"

El looked at Mike curiously. Her confusion outweighed her fear for a split second as she tried to piece out his question. Something jogged in her brain, dark and murky, a mash of screams and silver... But it was too far away, like a dream that slipped through her fingers the second she found the thread.

"No...?"

Mike paused again. He pressed his eyes tightly shut as though he was in physical pain. "Well," he said, his words difficult for him in a way

that El couldn't understand. "We did everything," he continued carefully. "Everyone is here. Kali, she's asleep down the hall. You-You slept all through the drive back to Indiana."

El didn't know when she'd begun to tremble again, but it was now wracking her body in an uncontrollable fit. Mike pulled her close once again, his embrace comforting in a way that she needed more than anything in the world.

She laid against his shoulder and tried to close her eyes, but as she did so the cacophony in her brain only got louder. So, she kept them open, her sightline trained perfectly on the bruises against his throat. Her trembling fingers reached out lightly, scared to touch it, scared to know.

"I'm okay. I promise," Mike whispered. His voice was vulnerable as he snatched her fingers up in his. He leaned back behind him quickly.

"Drink this," he said as he held up a water bottle. "You really need this."

El did as he said as he held the bottle to her lips. Once she was done, he led her back down onto the mattress and cradled her as she shook. His fingers dropped into her hair.

"Here. I've wanted to do this for hours but I didn't want to wake you."

El hazily watched Mike's focused expression as he leaned above her and worked with light and precise motions to remove the pins that held her hair in place. His touch overrode the physical aspects of her shock. El simply melted. Every nerve in her body calmed in relief as he smoothed his fingers one by one through the newly unraveled tufts.

"Feels good," she whispered hoarsely.

"Good," Mike breathed as he quirked a soft smile. "I'll do it for the rest of the night if you want me too." Mike's lips dropped to the top of her head in a soft kiss. "Just rest, okay? I promise you're safe. Everyone's safe. It's – It's over."

El surrendered to his care.

A million questions burned unanswered upon her lips, but as her eyes slid closed in response to his touch her confusion resettled and quieted the din. It scrambled her systems until all went quiet once more.

When her eyes opened once again, in a painful gasping flash, it felt as though not a single second had passed. But clearly, it had. Dim rays of morning light were streaming through Will's window. Mike was asleep beside her. His jaw was slack and his fingers were still knotted in her hair. He had clearly passed out on accident.

Inside of her skin, however, nothing had changed. Her panic crashed like an ocean in a storm. It lapped against her consciousness in waves. She was unable to reconcile the last truths she had known, before Will's bedroom, in a different state, on a different floor, under a forced control.

It was clear that she was, however, in control of her body. Because at that moment her body screamed a request for the bathroom.

It took an intense amount of courage to pull herself from the safety of Mike's arms. And twice that amount of courage to put her feet on the floor, test her legs, and move to the door.

Her knees trembled as she eased open the bedroom door and entered the hall. What greeted her was an instant shock of confusion. It was all so very hard to see in the dim dawn light, but it was apparent nonetheless. Her fingers clutched the ring around her neck on instinct.

This place was nothing like what she remembered.

The colors were all wrong. Things were in the wrong place. It was nothing like the consistent memory of Will's bedroom. But, nonetheless, she followed her memory to the location of the bathroom, and thankfully, she found it in the right spot.

The bathroom had changed, as well. Fresh paint and updated fixtures, all handled with a little more care. It seemed so silly that the simple changes could make her quake with panic.

She closed her eyes against the stimuli as she sat. It was a devil's bargain, however. For, seared on the backs of her eyelids laid something that made her feel just as, if not more, unwell.

She finally opted for staring at her own hands, and that served to bring her some calm. She watched the creases of her skin move around her knuckles as she bent and flexed her fingers of their own accord, as if to prove to herself that she had the control.

El ran the water in the sink when she was finished. The prospect of soap and water sounds like a luxury she craved so badly. The simple act went well until she caught her own reflection in the mirror.

Bloodshot eyes, dotted with little red specks of blown capillaries in the whites of her eyes, stared back at her. The remnants of her thick makeup were indistinguishable from the puffed blue and black skin that cried out below her gaze, swollen in a way she hadn't noticed until she had seen it herself. Veins popped in her forehead, down her cheeks, and through her neck. Her jaw ached so badly that it felt bruised when she touched it.

She began to tremble once again.

Her gaze flitted back up to her eyes. And, through the mirror, her fear and trauma looked back at her, clear as day.

She hiccupped as the first tear fell.

Her reflection was raw. It would not allow her to hide from the truth she had been avoiding.

The jarringly radiant blue of his eyes was etched into her memory like a scar. She could still feel his control, aching in the shadows of her muscles. It felt as though he had imbued parts of his own self into her body.

The cold procedural tone of the man who had raised her echoed her name as if he were standing in the room.

It took her everything she had to remind herself of Mike's assertion that they were... dead.

El looked away from herself in an instant. She took a deep breath and steeled herself for what felt like a long journey back to Mike in the bedroom down the hall.

She eased herself back out into the hall, but she stopped as she noticed the wall in front of her. Something else was new. Different. But it didn't scare her like before.

Photos lined wall in front of her, framed and arranged with a level of care she had never before seen in either Hopper's or Joyce's homes.

Faces she had forgotten stared back at her, all smiles and light. They felt like healing medicine for her eyes.

Jonathan and Nancy at Prom.

Joyce and the boys at an amusement park when they were kids.

...Hop and Joyce on their wedding day...

El choked as she leaned and drank it in as deeply as she could.

...Hopper and Sarah...

It was a picture El remembered well, though she had never seen it displayed. Hopper had kept in a box labeled 'Sarah' that she had snooped through more than once. He'd never known that she'd seen the picture. Yet now, here it was, presented with love upon the wall.

Hopper and... her.

She gasped lightly.

El stared back at herself from 1986. She was laughing, decked out in her favorite overalls and a frilly pink hand-me-down shirt from Nancy. She stood on the front porch of the very house she stood in now beside an equally smiling Jim Hopper as they fought to catch the melting drips off of their ice cream sandwiches.

The memory drifted up within her in an instant, long buried in a place that she had locked away. She'd laughed so hard when Jonathan had popped up out of nowhere and caught the snapshot.

She'd teased Hopper all the while that he'd been caught in a rare moment of not looking like a sourpuss.

"El?"

El almost fell over in fear as she felt the jolt of the sudden voice. Her knees buckled in an instant raw nerved panic. She reached out to catch herself against the wall.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to scare you..."

El looked slowly to her right. She was met by the kind eyes of a person who had never scared her once in his entire life.

He stood hesitantly near the entrance to the kitchen. His clothes and hair were disheveled. His eyes were warm yet exhausted. He kept his distance, giving her the space to make the next move.

He had gotten so unexpectedly tall.

"Will?"

The hallway lost any sense of unfamiliar paranoia in an instant. El followed her feet toward him, and he did the same as she simply crashed into his embrace.

They stood in the hallway for quite some time. Quiet, as they'd always been. Not really needing words. She tightened her arms around him as the familiar freedom of his presence simply washed over her, like it had never been gone at all. To feel it again, in an instant, calmed her in a way she so desperately needed.

"I missed you," he finally whispered, his voice thick as he spoke. "I – I'm so happy you're okay."

She nodded against him. The lump in her throat made it painful to talk. "I missed you, too."

"Um... do you want coffee? I was just hanging out in the kitchen..." he finally asked as he pulled away. She followed him gratefully without reply. El took in the remodeled view of the kitchen as Will poured her a cup. "I don't remember. Do you take sugar or milk?"

"I – I take it how I can get it, I guess," she replied with a shrug. "I don't usually get the choice. Whatever is fine."

"Oh, hmm..." he mused as he spied her behind him, took a moment to think, and then spooned a huge pile of sugar into the cup. "This is how I always expected you'd take your coffee," he said as he stirred the sugar into what was now less of a coffee and more of a coffee flavored syrup.

El couldn't help but laugh.

Will set the cup down beside his and gestured for her to take a seat at the table. Her legs thanked her for the rest as she slumped into the chair beside him. She watched him as he nervously ran his finger around the ring of his coffee cup.

"I'm sorry. I – I don't really know where to start," he said shyly.

El laughed softly. She bit her lip to hold back a tear. "You got... really tall."

"Oh, yeah," Will replied bashfully. "Had a late growth spurt Junior and Senior year."

"Why are you awake?" El asked curiously. "Did you sleep?"

Will shook his head. The nervousness she had initially noticed returned to his expression in full. "It's silly," he said with a shrug. "I know they're fine. I'm just - just waiting for Hop and Mom to get home from the hospital."

Yet another memory crashed back into place as concrete crashed down in her mind's eye. Her stomach to lurch as she gasped.

"El?"

"What ha –".

"Do you... not know?" Will asked carefully.

El searched her mind frantically, but yet again, she found that she had to shake her head 'no'.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Will exclaimed. "I didn't know you didn't know!" Will reached out and placed his hand over hers. "Hop. He's fine. He - he just broke his leg pretty bad. They kept him overnight so they could make sure they did everything they needed to. Mom stayed with him because, you know, she's Mom."

"That's - that's it?" she hiccupped, not able to reconcile his words with her nauseating memory of the event.

"Yeah. He's going to be fine, El. I'm sorry, I forgot you might not have known." His eyes were wide and empathetic. Before she knew it his arm was around her shoulders.

El couldn't hold it in as her eyes, fresh with happy tears, turned dark in an instant. "I missed what happened when he..." El struggled against the jumble of words in her mouth, "They - they took me when he got hurt? I knew he was... hurt but... I didn't know if he was... if he..."

"He's okay," Will reassured her quietly. "They...when who took you?"

El froze at Will's direct question. A cold wave traced down her body as her voice stuck in her throat. Will was quiet as she breathed through it. He simply held her shoulders with patient silence.

She wanted to brush off the question. She wanted to sweep it under the rug and move along.

But... this was Will.

"P...Brenner..." she finally breathed, "And a man... like me, I guess? He... he could control me."

Will stiffened. His breath went short.

"I- I don't know how I got out. I don't remember," she stuttered with nervous confusion as she looked up to him.

Will's expression was empathetic in a way that broke her heart. It was almost as though her words were mirrored back to her from his own eyes.



"I don't know how you got out either. Mike didn't say..." Will said carefully, his voice quieter and more tight than it had been before. "But... I do know you did get out. And Mike said it's really really over. It's over, El."

El's breath was shallow and pained as she heard the foreign concept of finality put into the air once again. First by Mike. Now by Will.

The truth they seemed to speak felt so far away.

Fresh tears began to itch at her eyes.

"But I... I still feel it..." The words slipped from her tongue in surprise.

"I know," Will replied with a surety that surprised her. Something haunted behind his gaze, and it dawned on her in an instant. A connection. "Your body didn't feel like it was yours anymore." He said simply.

She nodded shakily in surprise.

"I understand," he said, his voice almost a whisper. "But... It's not real... Not anymore."

El was quiet as his words actually succeeded to settle below the deafening swirl of her thoughts. She breathed them in and repeated them in her mind.

Time passed silently at the table as they sat with each other, words fading away. He rubbed his hand with comforting consistency against her back as she focused on her breath.

"Thank you," she finally whispered. "For understanding."

"Anytime. I mean that. I – " Will looked away and took a deep breath, as though he was making a decision. When he looked back his gaze was firm, connected, and felt so incredibly safe. "I'll talk to you about this anytime you need. Okay? I... I get it."

"I know," she replied gratefully. "I'm – I'm sorry."

"Sorry?"

"That you..." El shivered. "Get this."

Will blinked as his hazel eyes glazed with tears. "I'm sorry that you get this, too."

"El Hopper! You're awake!?"

El and Will both startled as the moment snapped in half. Without any warning at all, Dustin Henderson strode into the room, full of energy and exuberance, and practically pulled her from her chair. He pulled her into a hug so tight that it hurt. His smile was wide and squinty and so very much the same as he pulled back and surveyed her like a proud parent.

"Hi, Dustin," she laughed weakly.

"You remembered me?!" he exclaimed in a booming voice. "You look great, Ellie! A little rough around the edges here and there, but that's to be expected after a telekinetic brain battle! I'm so happy you're here!"

"Me too," she said bemusedly. Her face hurt from the unexpected smile he had elicited.

"Okay, give me a minute. Then I'm coming back and I'm making you the biggest breakfast you can handle," Dustin boasted. "It's really the only meal I know how to cook, and it's filled with chocolate. Sound good?"

El nodded shyly. "Yeah..."

"You cooking for us, too?"

"Well, I guess I have to now," Dustin grumbled as El turned to the new voices in the entryway.

It was almost too much.

Max could hardly contain her smile as they locked eyes. She was stunning. So much the same, but so very different at the same time.

Beside her, his face nervous and hopeful, stood Lucas. A bit taller, a bit broader. Handsome and understated in a way that suited him so well. They were both in pajamas. They had clearly been here all night.

"How dare you leave me... with these nerds... for over six years!" Max sneered. Her blue eyes, shining with mirth, belied her words as she moved through the kitchen and caught El into a firm hug.

"I'm so sorry. That must have been terrible," El giggled as she dropped her head gratefully to Max's shoulder.

"Oh, you have no idea. God, I missed you!"

A second pair of arms wrapped around the two of them at the same time.

"Wait your turn, Lucas! You're not stealing this from me," Max whined in a giggling muffle against El's shoulder.

"You had your turn and I'm not even trying to take it away from you!" Lucas cried. "Okay, now I am," he said in an instant as he broke El out of Max's arms and into his own. "I cannot believe you're here! Look at this girl. Can you guys believe this?!"

"EL!?"

Everyone in the kitchen jumped in surprise as a door slammed in the hallway and footsteps pounded through the hall. Mike appeared in the doorway, almost sliding past the entrance on socked feet. He looked up, surveyed the room, and instantly blushed as four sets of eyes stared at him in surprise.

It was adorable how pink Mike's cheeks tinged as he noticed the attention of all of his friends, but it didn't stop him from crossing the kitchen in three long strides and pulling El into a deep hug. "I'm sorry," he stuttered. His heart fluttered loudly against her ear as she allowed him to pull her into his chest. "I just – I woke up and you weren't there and then I heard yelling and I– "

"It's okay," she laughed. "I understand."

"Okay, good," Mike replied with a sigh of relief as he shook his hair out of his eyes and looked down on her nervously. "Are you feeling any better?"

"Of course she's feeling better! She's with us now," Dustin called as he reentered the kitchen. "Right, Ellie?"

"A little bit, yeah," she replied. It was a surprise how true the words actually felt. She turned back to Mike carefully. "Are you okay?"

Mike nodded, though his breath was still shallow and his eyes were still nervous.

"Ellie, do you still like Eggos?" Dustin asked from behind them as he rummaged through the fridge.

At that, Mike seemed to relax. He laughed. His voice was hoarse as he replied for her. "El showed up at my house last week, woke up the next day, and pretty much demanded Eggos for breakfast."

"I did not!" she countered as she weakly nudged his arm.

"Yeah, you definitely did," Mike teased lightly.

"Oh! And you had them! Nice job!" Dustin interjected loudly as he lifted his hand in a high five to Mike. "I saw that box in the back of your fridge! I almost ate them for drunk munchies but then I figured you were keeping them for El so I shouldn't mess up, you know, the plan."

El glanced to her left to find Mike wide eyed, looking like he'd been caught in something.

"Wha – What plan?... "

Dustin's smile went from jovial to mischievous in an instant.

Mike winced, "Dustin, don't – "

"Oh, Ellie. Let me tell you," Dustin started confidentially as he sidled toward her. He put his arm around her as though he was telling her a stage whispered secret. "Mike kept a box of Eggos in our fridge from

the day we moved in with each other in college."

"Dustin – " Mike groaned as he leaned back against the counter and hid behind his hand.

"He explicitly told me I wasn't allowed to eat them. Yet, curiously enough, I noticed he had never eaten them either!" Dustin sighed dramatically, "Do you know HOW MANY TIMES I had to stop myself from eating those damned Eggos when I was dying, literally dying, from drunk munchies?! But I never did. I'm that good of a friend."

The room erupted in laughter. El couldn't contain her surprised smile.

"Well, it's nice to hear that Wheeler never changed. Like, at all," Max quipped as she took a seat at the table.

"I don't know," Dustin shrugged as he turned around and began to prepare the counter for breakfast. "Seems like he had a good plan, in hindsight. I mean, you know, since it worked."

The kitchen began to buzz with Dustin's cooking as Lucas helped and Max and Will fell into their own conversation. El slid closer to Mike. He had scooted away from the group and was now down toward the edge of the counter by the back door. His eyes were closed and his face was bright red.

It was a moment of adorable innocence that simply made her heart burst.

"Did you really keep Eggos around in case I showed up?" she whispered incredulously, her heart fluttering in the silliest and most foreign way. Mike opened one of his eyes comically into a squint as though he was preparing himself for a let down. He sighed.

"Does this win me points? Or does it make me look like a wastoid?" he asked hesitantly.

El bit her lip in mock contemplation. She leaned in against him, pulled his arms away from his chest, and nestled herself there as she guided his hands to her back. "It definitely makes you look like a wastoid," she teased as she leaned up and gave him the quickest peck on the lips. "But, it also wins you points."

"I can accept that," Mike replied, instantly at ease. His expression was warm, which wonderfully complimented his flushed cheeks.

"Are you okay?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah," she replied easily, "Are you okay?"

Mike nodded. He looked around the room at the buzzing energy of his friends and then back to her. Something stirred in the depths of his eyes. He bit his lip in a secret smile. "I'm perfect."

It was so simple and easy and bizarrely time bending, the way Mike leaned down and kissed her that moment in the Byers's kitchen. It carried a warmth that burned off any remaining panic she had awoken with.

It wouldn't last, she knew that. There was so much left for her, for them, to unpack. However, for this single moment? It was perfect.

"Oh God! They didn't change at all! They're still so gross!" Max cried out.

"Get a room!"

"Please not mine!"

As if on reflex, El felt Mike's hand raise off of her back. She could sense his middle finger in the air, pointed resolutely at his friends, as she laughed against his lips. In the very best way, it was as if no time had passed at all.

## **Notes for the Chapter:**

Aww it was nice to write something happy(ish) for a change ;)

Thank you for your patience while I worked through this chapter! As always, I'd love to hear from you below!

Come hang out with me on Tumblr @dancingskygreen and check out the Spotify playlist

at [https://open.spotify.com/user/laurawiese/  
playlist/538rIGfyj8dv6h7WZ0lj0d?  
si=9CH0N85\\_THmH-utfEuTuyQ](https://open.spotify.com/user/laurawiese/playlist/538rIGfyj8dv6h7WZ0lj0d?si=9CH0N85_THmH-utfEuTuyQ)

## 23. Chapter 23

### Notes for the Chapter:

Hello my lovely readers! We have arrived at the final chapter. I know there was mention of a possible epilogue, but upon completing this chapter I felt such a closure that anything else would simply have been dragging it out. So please, accept my humble offering of a 16k word final chapter!

"I think she fell asleep..."

Mike looked down to where El's head laid nestled into the crook of his shoulder, buried deep in the couch. She was barely visible beneath her mane of frizzy curls, but the steady and slow sensation of her breath against his chest served as evidence that Lucas was right.

Mike wasn't exactly surprised. In the two hours that they had been awake, El's energy levels had swung around dramatically. She had wavered against him, weak on her feet, when he'd entered the kitchen. Her eyes had been foggy beneath her still bruised lids, but her smile had been so bright that he couldn't find it in himself to deprive her of the reunion, no matter how much he believed that she should continue to rest.

To see her smiling in the presence of her friends after... everything? It served to momentarily calm something that he could not stop from spinning within him.

And as breakfast ended and they had migrated to the living room, El began to relax deeply into Mike's embrace, so much so that not even the voices of long lost friends could keep her from fading out.

"We should let her sleep," Mike said, his voice low so as not to wake her.

"Yeah, we should get out of here. I could use a shower," Max agreed as she stood up. "You could use one, too," she joked to Mike with a mocking wink.



"Trust me, I'm aware of that." Mike looked down at himself and chuckled. He and El looked ridiculous. Their clothes were days old, still caked with dried blood and grey dust. They probably smelled like hell.

"Come on," Max said as she held her hand out to Lucas. "Let's head back to your parents."

Lucas nodded as he took Max's hand and let her pull him up. "Do you guys need anything? Should we run any errands for you? Things are kind of crazy around here."

"I don't think so," Will replied. "We're good for another day or two. Thanks, though."

"Okay, we'll stop by tomorrow then," Lucas offered.

"Fine, I'll get out of here, too," Dustin grumbled as he pushed himself to standing. "This was so fun, though! I mean, come on guys! Can you believe this?!" he stage-whispered with excitement as he gestured toward El. "El is back. El. Is back. That's crazy! Mike, you still have to tell us how the hell any of this happened."

Mike's throat tightened at the question. He nodded, but did not say a word.

Dustin didn't push him, though. And before Mike knew it, the three of them had suited up for the cold, said their final goodbyes, and were out the door.

Mike looked over to find Will at the other end of the couch, close behind El in falling asleep.

Still exhausted as well, Mike couldn't quite talk himself into either waking El or carrying her into the bedroom. So instead, he let El's body pin him to the couch in an attempt to relax. As the minutes passed in the silence, his open eyes became lost in the middle distance as the comfort of his friend's voices faded from his nerves and the jarring edge returned.

He swallowed against the still present pain in his throat. The shadow of the crushing hand echoed with each move of his Adam's apple in a

way that made him wince. He shifted against the bandages on his back and felt the sting beneath. Finally, he dared to let his chest expand in full. For the hundredth time he found that didn't feel a bullet lodged within. Instead, he felt El nuzzle against him as she moved along with his breath.

Now, just like then, her presence existed instead of the wound.

His stomach lurched at the thought.

He couldn't escape it, to be honest. It had been there waiting for him inside of every moment of silence. It had lurked at the edge of conversations and followed him deep into his fitful sleep. It felt like a taunting itch that he was unable to scratch. And it had grown worse, not better, as the hours had passed. His mind circulated, without his control, around a repeating play-by-play of every detail, every movement, and every way in which Mike had let his own hubris and his own big mouth run rampant until he had almost lost it all.

Mike shivered as he found himself back at the heart of his growing guilt yet again.

It was shamefully clear to him in hindsight how naïve he had been, and how many mistakes he had made. He had been so embarrassingly sloppy. With his oversight at obvious illusion. With his weak fingers that couldn't even hold onto a gun. With his loose tongue that could do nothing but scream.

They were mistakes he could not forgive, because each one had almost cost El her freedom forever.

That was the part that hurt the most. Screw his own life. He had almost lost her hers.

Mike didn't know exactly what Dr. Brenner had had in mind for such an untamable girl as El Hopper. But, her knew there had to have been a detailed plan. How couldn't there have been? The man had attempted to capture her for years, all the while with the knowledge that she was not going to go down without a fight. There had to have been a plan, pre-tested and ready to deploy within a moment's notice.

If Martin Brenner had ruined El's mother's mind *on a whim*, what had the plan been for El?

"Mike?" Will shifted on the couch as he rubbed his eyes. "Shit, I passed out. You want help getting her back to the bedroom?"

Mike nodded, eternally grateful for the distraction.

His body screamed as he gingerly attempted to lift El from the couch without waking her. It was a testament to adrenalin that he had been able to carry her for so long that night, but his arms and back had paid the price. They ached down to his very bones. Each tendon cried as he attempted to lift her. Yet, with a little help from Will, and a little help from El as she flirted with the space between wakefulness and sleep, he succeeded.

"Mike?" El breathed as she wrapped her arms loosely around his neck. "I can walk..."

"But I'm already carrying you, so what's the point in that?" he replied as they entered the hallway.

"Did they go?" she asked.

"Yeah, they're coming back tomorrow, though."

"I wanted to say goodbye..." she said morosely. "I'm sorry I fell asleep."

"It's okay. You'll see them again," he said softly.

"Promise...?"

"Promise."

Will's bedroom door was wide open from when Mike had rushed into the hallway a couple of hours before, and that aided him as he easily entered the room and placed El on the bed. A shaft of morning light streamed through the window where she lay. El scrunched her face and moaned in the cutest way as she tried to hide from it in the pillow. The blue of her veins had receded to a slight bruise over the night, and the puffiness of her eyes had calmed just a bit.

El's eyes eased open as Mike pulled the blanket up from the edge of the bed.

"You should get more sleep," he whispered as he tucked the blanket around her. But she didn't let him succeed. Instead, her hand rose and snatched his wrist with a precision and strength he never could have expected.

"You're leaving...?" El asked suddenly.

"I- I don't think I can sleep," he replied in surprise. "I don't want to keep you awake."

The way that El looked at Mike in that moment caused his body to forget how to move. She did not look anything like the sleepy girl he had just pulled up from the couch. The fog in her eyes was gone. In its place, the honey brown of her irises almost glowed with edge.

Mike knew that look, though he hadn't seen it in so many years.

She licked her chapped lips slowly as her fingers found his. "Please stay."

Without a word, Mike nodded. El smiled ever so slightly as she wriggled backwards to make space for him.

"Better?" he asked as he laid his head on the pillow to face her.

El slipped her arm beneath Mike's neck and pulled him in close into her until their foreheads were almost touching. "Better," she whispered.

Mike couldn't easily explain it, but as she pulled him in he felt an instant sense of self consciousness crest over his chest. It was the oddest sensation. He had spent hours holding her when she couldn't respond. An entire day. He had re-memorized the way her body moved when she breathed, the exact curvature of the small of her back, the precise angle at which her head best fit on his shoulder. This moment felt so very different, however. For now, she was present and aware. She was holding *him*.

El caressed Mike's shoulder with a comfort he didn't know how to

accept, and his breath stilled as her fingertips found their way to his neck. Nervousness lodged in his throat directly beneath her touch as her eyes drew down to the splay of bruises. He watched with reticence as pain entered her face. He listened as her breath shortened. And, as though the air could hold charge, he felt a dark tension appear around them.

The cocoon of home quickly dissolved, and the bleak reality that they had endured filtered into the room instead.

He braced for her inevitable question, but it did not come.

Instead, with feather light care, El dropped her lips to his neck.

Chills traced down Mike's body as he swallowed tight against her tender kiss. It was a simple action. Caring. Delicate. It threatened to unravel him in an instant.

"I want kill the person who did this..." she breathed against him.

Mike struggled to speak. "They're already dead."

"Good."

She stayed there for a moment, her breath warm against his neck, until a small pained moan existed her lips.

"Are you okay?" he whispered.

"Don't worry about me," she replied as her fingers caressed his neck once again. "Let me worry about you."

Mike felt his voice fail as she ran her thumb lightly over the spot where he knew she could feel his quickly beating heart.

"Who did it?" she finally asked.

Mike took a deep breath and steadied his nerves. "Six."

"Who killed him?" she asked without delay.

Mike almost choked on the name. "Sev."

El seemed to take in the information with no surprise at all. Mike watched her nervously as she pulled back and laid her head on the pillow beside him. She looked at him such deep clarity. His heartbeat fluttered harder against her touch.

"You're scared," she observed quietly as her eyes raked over his face. "Why are you scared?"

He opened his mouth in an attempt to reply, but the words felt too big for his guilty lips. "It's just..." he stuttered. "There's so much you don't remember. We... we almost didn't make it, El."

At that, El's eyes narrowed in surprise. Her hand slid from his neck and flattened, warm and strong, against his chest. When she spoke, her voice was soft, but matter of fact.

"Of course we almost didn't make it."

Mike stared at El, instantly agape. "What?"

And with that, an odd smile rose to her lips.

"What we did was insane," she said simply, with a hint of a laugh. "Mike, why do you think I didn't want you to go with me? That – that was a suicide mission."

Mike studied El with surprise, confusion, and an inability to keep up with her. This girl, who just hours before had awoken in screams of terror, the girl who had shaken in his arms until he had been able to coax her back to sleep... that girl was now so calm, so sure of herself, so understanding. She was comforting *him*. It knocked him right off his axis.

El ran her hand over his cheek then, and at her touch a comfort so strong washed over him that he could barely breathe. Mike stared into El's eyes and found that, for the first time in so many days, he was able to put down his guard. He laid transfixed, soaking her up as she held him, unsure of what would come next.

Her hand made that decision.

El's other hand ran a soft circle against Mike's back, but stopped

against the bandages that Max had applied. "What is this?" she whispered.

Drawing strength from the most powerful girl he had ever known, he steeled himself.

"Concrete shrapnel," he replied softly, with more ease than he could have expected. He reached out and ran his fingers against El's cheek. "I shielded you from it when the ceiling fell in the lab."

And with that, El's eyes went wide. And Mike spoke.

---

In the light of morning in Will Byers' bed, far from the events that had almost ended both of their lives, El Hopper held Mike Wheeler in her arms as he served to stitch her fragmented memory back together again. She listened as he detailed every harrowing step of their mission and their escape. And in the reflection of his pained eyes, El felt her own memory begin to take form.

Flashes, quick pinpoints of screams and pain, had floated unbidden through her mind from the moment she had awoken. They had been hazy at first. Single utterances of her name screamed through the dark. The cold tile against her cheek. A crash of concrete and a flash of silver. They felt like a dream, their threads sinewy and tattered. They held no context at all.

Mike served to mend the seams. He was careful and hesitant as he shared his experience and helped her with hers. And through him... she remembered.

She remembered with a sickening jolt the blast as her body became hers again and she flew through the air. She remembered Mike's ruined voice calling her name, raw and broken and desperate for her. She could feel the ghosts of his hands on her face as she had cascaded through the black, and the loss of his heat in a sudden ripping motion. She could remember the cold ground. The spinning of her head. Mike's passionate screams. The blasting crack of the hammer of the gun... her slippery mind on the bullet as it careened toward Mike's chest...

... and Martin Brenner's vacant eyes as his body hit the floor...

El held onto Mike's gaze as she relived the moment in which she had almost lost him forever.

His hands felt hot against her back, and they trembled as though he too was watching her memories through the color in her eyes.

"Mike..." she breathed as she reached for his chest. Her eyes clouded with tears as it took hold of her completely.

His hand grazed softly over her hair.

"Are you okay?" he whispered gently.

El stared blankly at his worried expression, and in a sudden rush of something she could not quite explain... she laughed.

Because, *of course* he would ask. Of course this man who had *killed* for her, who had been inches away from *dying* for her, of course he would ask if *she* was okay.

And in that, she realized that the one thing that could have possibly hurt. The vacant eyes of the man she had always known as Papa, gone by a bullet that she herself had lodged deep into his brain... That one thing that could hurt... felt like nothing more than an afterthought. A simple kill. Absolutely meaningless compared to the person that she had saved.

Her heart seemed to attempt an escape from her chest as she stared into Mike's eyes. Her voice felt so small as she spoke, and the words did not feel like enough. "Mike, you saved my life."

And, to her utmost surprise... Mike shook his head no in reply.

"I almost got us both killed..." he countered with a shaky breath. "You stopped a bullet *two inches* from my chest. You saved *my* life."

El simply stared at Mike with shock.

It was so far from what he deserved to feel. So far from the truth of what he had done. So far from the power of his voice, enough to



make her rise just in time. So far from the words she could hear in her tattered memory.

*"I would do anything for her!"*

With a need that overwhelmed her, El cupped Mike's chin firmly and held his gaze. "Mike," she said, resolute and intent. "Mike, we saved each other."

Mike's eyes grew wide at her words, faltering and needy, but she didn't see much else, because at that moment El crashed her lips against his with a burst of passion that she could not contain. Her hands roved over his chest greedily and found his heartbeat, steady and sure, beneath the tips of her fingers. She didn't care that his lips were chapped, that his skin was oily, that he was days away from his last shower. In that moment, El simply cared that Mike was in alive and breathing, and in her arms.

It was all so incredibly unbelievable.

"How?" she breathed against his lips.

"H-how what?"

"How did you kill One?"

Mike pulled away, his hands firm on her shoulders, confusion instant on his brow.

"One?" he asked.

"The man..." she stuttered with need, "who trapped me... you - "

"Oh, that asshole?" Mike asked with instantly cold eyes. He shrugged. "Lucky shot."

*"Lucky shot?!"* she exclaimed incredulously. "Mike! That had to have been a *perfect* shot or you'd be dead!"

And at that, something dangerous sparked in Mike's eyes. The tiniest smirk arose to the corner of his lips as his voice dropped low. "I told you I was a pretty good shot. You just didn't listen to me."

El gaped at Mike, and within the challenge of his gaze it suddenly struck her hard... That dangerous spark present in his eye. That dancing and capable glint that held a valiantly stubborn edge. It had been there all along. From the very moment that she had found him on that cold New York City dock.

She just hadn't fully seen it until now.

"Holy shit," she said breathlessly as she bit her lip to quell the smile that was beginning to own her face. "You turned into such a badass."

Mike's eyes went alight at that, and El felt her heart quiver dangerously as he smiled. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," El breathed with awe as her wide eyes raked hungrily across his face. "You're just..." *Capable. Courageous. Reckless. Insane.* "You're perfect." *Caring. Dedicated. Stubborn. Passionate. Amazing.* "I love you."

Mike bit his lip as a bashful blush overwhelmed his pale skin. His hand found its way to graze her cheek.

"So... you're not mad that I went rogue...?"

El emphatically shook her head no.

"I underestimated you," she admitted freely. "I should've listened. I'm sorry."

The deep hue of Mike's eyes warmed to a blistering intensity at her words. She willingly followed as his hand, still warm against her cheek, as he pulled her so close that their noses grazed. His breath felt warm upon her face as his words filled her ears.

"Good, because I never could have left that building without you, El. I love you so much. I- I don't even know what to do with it sometimes."

And with that, Mike exhaled hard and pulled her tight against his lips. It was a rush that took her breath away. El's head spun with the beat of his heart as it crashed against the matching beat of hers.

Upon Mike's lips, El tasted the sweet flavor of her freedom... for the

very first time.

---

It was the commotion of voices echoing down the hall that finally made El pull away from Mike's embrace. All were voices that she recognized. Some were voices that she had been desperately craving to hear.

"They're home."

El's heart began to flutter intensely as she unraveled her limbs from Mike and they both scrambled out of the bed. Moving as quickly as her stiff limbs could carry her, she flew out of the bedroom door, Mike tight on her heels.

"Just let him help you, Hop!"

"I'm telling you, Hop! I can – "

"- They gave me crutches for a reason! I can do it myself."

El almost crashed into Will as he raced out of the kitchen doorway, and together, the three of them tumbled to the entryway in a throng. El suddenly wavered on her feet, her small spurt of energy mostly spent from her time with Mike. She felt herself instantly caught by Mike's arms.

Joyce... Joyce Hopper... absolutely swimming in what must have been Hopper's coat, stopped dead in her tracks on the threshold of the front door. The lines on her face had deepened over the years, but in exchange, there was a softness to her expression that El had never seen before. Her greying hair hung limp against her shoulders as her lips turned up into a radiant and quivering smile.

El swallowed hard against the newly risen lump in her throat. "Hi..." El said quietly, not quite knowing what to do. But she didn't have to worry, because the older seemed to forget everything that she had been doing just seconds before and simply crossed the small expanse to sweep El up into her arms.

"Oh dear, *welcome home*," Joyce cooed against El's shoulder as she held her in a back breaking hug. Her hands ran soft quick circles

against El's back. "I am so so so happy you're okay."

El found that her mouth did not work for a moment as she returned the woman's embrace.

"I'm sorry..." was all she could manage to sputter.

"I don't know what you're apologizing for, but oh sweetie, I forgive you!" Joyce cried warmly into El's ear.

Truth be told, El wasn't sure she knew what she was apologizing for either. For leaving? For coming back? For getting her husband injured? For ruining Christmas? For all of it?

"Hop's going to be okay," Joyce continued reassuringly, seeming to decide the source of El's apology. She pulled away, her hand still rubbing circles on El's back as she turned to the door. "Tell her you're going to be okay, Hop."

El looked up to find Jim Hopper leaning exhaustedly on crutches, with a grumpy frown but a smile in his eyes.

El's own eyes filled with relieved tears.

She could not unsee the exploding wall that had almost taken him from the world. She could not forget the gut wrenching moments when she had been convinced that this moment had been robbed from her forever. But here he stood, at full height, resilient and tall.

"I'm going to be okay, kid," he grumbled. "You okay?"

But El didn't answer. Instead, she crossed to where he stood and pulled herself into his chest.

"El –" he protested weakly, unsteady on his feet. "I... I can't... oh!"

A slight push of force was all she needed to keep him safe and upright as she gave him the hug he deserved. "I'm so sorry you're hurt," she whispered.

Hopper's breath was short and surprised, but he eventually gave in to her kinetic assistance and pulled one arm around her shoulder.

"Could of been way worse, kid. Everything... it's going to be okay."

El smiled up and met the eyes of the man who had, yet again, gone to such great lengths to keep her safe.

"Oh, I'm so happy to see this. It's...", Joyce appeared at El's side, easing her off of her father in a likely attempt to keep Hopper's leg safe, all tight smiles and shining eyes. El allowed it. She sent one final push of strength to help him restabilize on his crutch, and found herself pulled into Joyce's arms one more time. Joyce held her at the shoulder as she raked her eyes hungrily over El's face. "Just look at you! You grew up into such a beautiful young woman."

El chuckled gratefully as she sniffed.

"Come on Joyce, you gotta give her some shit. You can't let her off that easy," Hopper joked gruffly.

"Yes I can and you won't tell me otherwise," Joyce bit back playfully at her husband before she turned back to El. "Are you hungry? Have you eaten? Last I heard you hadn't woken up in days?"

"I – I've been awake for a few hours. Everyone made breakfast. I'm okay." El replied.

"Well, alright," Joyce replied nervously. She pulled away and rang her hands as she scanned the room. "Well, let me do *something* for you. Coffee? Water?"

"Mom!" Will interjected suddenly as he stepped forward and put his arm gingerly around Joyce. "You haven't slept in three days. We can take care of her."

"I know. I know! But I was so *scared* for you! God, I've been... I've been scared for you for years..." Joyce said absently before she shook her head and smiled back at El once again. "I am so happy you're home. Please stay as long as you need. Okay? This is your home."

The word hit El like a bolt through her feet.

"Th-thank you," was all she could muster.

"We'll have to make some room, though." Joyce said nervously as she looked at Will. "We don't have enough bedrooms for everyone. Oh! Steve?"

"Yeah, Mrs. Hop?"

"You mentioned you have an extra bedroom last night, right? I didn't make that up?"

"Nope, I said it," Steve replied casually. El looked over to see him for the first time. Steve stood behind Hop, leaning casually against the doorjam to the front door. Unlike the rest of them, Steve looked freshly showered. He was wearing fresh civilian clothes with no trace of his Hawkins Police attire. His hair was coiffed with a perfection El hadn't seen back in New York. "I could take Mike and El, or you know, you Kali?" He said off handedly as he looked toward the kitchen doorway, past El's shoulder.

Something sizzled in El's stomach as she followed Steve's gaze.

The woman standing against the doorway, visibly uncomfortable and almost hiding, was a sight that made El almost lose her mind.

Kali's attention glanced nervously from Steve and back to El before her hand came up lightly in a wave.

"Oh, thank god," El exclaimed breathlessly as she pushed away from everyone around her and launched to the doorway where her sister stood. Her tears were flowing freely now, positively drowning her in relief as she latched onto her sister's shoulders and looked her in the eye.

"Are you okay?" El asked Kali seriously. "Did they do anything to you?"

"Other than be major assholes who got exactly what they deserved? No," Kali replied with a clear and defiant smirk. "No lasting damage."

And with that, El pulled her as deeply into her arms as she could.

"I was so scared you'd... I was – "

"- I was too," Kali stuttered, with so much more vulnerability than her first words. "I thought they had you too, Janey. When Mike and Steve came to break me out I couldn't believe it," Kali pulled herself more tightly to El's ear. "Are you okay? You were...God, you were so fucked up."

"I feel like I got hit by a truck, but... I'm okay," El replied as she tightened her arms around her sister once more, soaked in the fresh smell of her hair, and sniffed back another stream of tears.

Kali pulled back, and when she did so she grabbed El's hand hard. Her eyes changed as she scanned the room and, with a secret look, it snapped into place for El. El looked around the room, and through Kali's eyes, saw an overwhelming mass of strangers all staring at them intently.

It was then that El remembered with a hint of embarrassment that she had interrupted something mid-conversation. Steve's eyes were still focused directly on Kali.

"You were saying?" Kali asked Steve quietly.

Steve's hands suddenly rose into the air in a placating gesture. "You'd have a private room and I promise I'll leave you alone. You can use all of my hot water and eat all of my food and you won't have to deal with all of the crazy people that come and go out of this house. I swear, I love most of them like they're my own kids, but they drive me insane."

Kali stared at Steve curiously for a moment before she turned back to El. And El saw in Kali's eyes what her answer would be.

"It's okay," El assured her before Kali could open her mouth to ask. "I know it's crazy here."

Kali tugged nervously on El's hand as her eyes awkwardly scanned the room once more. "I mean... how can I turn down using all of your hot water?" she asked Steve.

"You can't," El interjected before anyone else could talk. "But... can you stay here for a couple of hours?"

"Yeah," Kali confirmed hesitantly before she turned back to Steve. "I do make the most sense to go. And some privacy sounds... nice. Yes, I can go. Can you come back tonight? I – I need to spend some time with Jane."

The collective furrow of brows from everyone in the room at the utterance of *Jane* almost made El laugh out loud.

"Well, great!" Steve said enthusiastically, with a level of pep that almost seemed manic. "Should... um... should Sev come too?"

It was Mike who spoke up then. "No, Sev should stay here. Um... right, Kali?"

"Sev's not going to leave you," Kali replied matter-of-factly as she smirked at Mike. "You'd probably do well to get used to that forever."

"Okay, we'll make space for her here," Mike said. "If that's... if that's okay with you Mrs. Hopper?"

"Of course!" Joyce said graciously. "Whatever would make her comfortable. Where is she?"

El watched Mike as he looked around the room in surprise. "I don't... know." His eyes coasted back to Kali.

Kali simply shrugged.

Mike was on it in an instant, ambling quickly from the group. "Sev?"

"Well, great. That's settled. Thanks for helping out, Steve," Joyce said.

"Any time, Mrs. Hop. If you need anything at all, you call me, okay?"

"I will," Joyce replied gratefully. "And Kali, please know you're welcome to spend as much time here as you'd like. I just wish we had more beds!"

"It's...fine," Kali replied nervously as her hand clamped more tightly onto El's. "Thank you, M...Mrs. Hopper."

"Please, call me Joyce," she said kindly.



At that, Will returned his arm around his mother's shoulder and tugged her toward the direction of the kitchen. "Come on, Mom. I'll get you coffee."

Steve took the opportunity to cross closer to the girls by the doorway.

"How you feeling, Ellie?" he asked as he ran his fingers through his hair. "You look a hell of a lot better than yesterday."

"Well," El replied, feeling her exhaustion in a new wave after so many minutes on her feet. "I don't really remember yesterday, so I can't say..."

Steve laughed and before El knew it, she was in his arms and her feet were off the ground and dangling in the air. "Just no more running off like an idiot, you hear me?" he exclaimed as he squeezed her in a deep ridiculous hug.

"Okay, okay, just put me down!" El yelled in surprise.

Steve obeyed, and when he did he turned his attention to Kali.

"So, I can pick you up around dinner time. Anything you'd want for dinner?" he asked.

"Um?" Kali stuttered with a sideways glance toward El. "Chinese?"

"I love Chinese!" Steve replied happily. "That's pretty much all we ate when we were in New York. I swear, nothing else is open around Christmas there. Not even grocery stores. I can't say the one Chinese place here is quite as good as New York. But it's pretty good for, you know, Hawkins. We can swing past there when we leave."

El watched Steve speak to Kali with a growing fascination. Kali licked her lips in confusion and just managed to lamely nod.

"Cool, I'll uh... I'll see you at seven, then," Steve said, "And you, Ellie. You really need to get more rest. I still can't believe they didn't let me take you to the hospital."

"I told you, the doctor wasn't going to be able to do shit for her," Kali interjected with her patent chastising tone that El knew from

experience was only reserved for people she either absolutely loathed or absolutely loved. "I told you she'd be fine."

"Okay, I get it! Gotta be careful and all," Steve replied as his hands came up in the air in surrender once again. "I'll see you at seven."

"Sure..." Kali said as her tone backed off in an instant.

"Alright! Well, have a great day ladies," Steve said with a wave of his car keys.

Together, they watched the man leave. El couldn't help it as her eyes narrowed toward Kali in a sideways manner.

Kali rolled her eyes and sighed. "That man is an idiot."

"Right..." El said slowly.

"Oh! El, dear?"

El turned around in surprise to find Joyce standing in the doorway to the kitchen, ringing her hands.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but I'm about to fall asleep on my feet. I don't think I've slept in...oh... three nights? Anyway. I wanted to show you something first."

"I'm going to go to the bathroom," Kali whispered as she pumped El's hand and left the women alone.

Joyce nodded over her shoulder as she smiled shyly. "It's this way."

El curiously followed Joyce through the kitchen, to the side door at the end of the room, and into the enclosed back porch. El pulled the decimated sleeves of her ruined sweater over her fingers against the sudden cold of the uninsulated room.

Joyce pointed indirectly to a small stack of boxes in the middle of the floor. "Will and I pulled these out of the shed when we were waiting for you and Hop all of those days. I tried to keep them off the ground over the years, so I don't think they got wet or moldy, but you never know with that shed out there, it's – "

An overwhelming shiver slid straight down El's body.

"- wh...what is this?" El asked shakily.

"It's your things," Joyce replied simply.

El stared at the boxes in disbelief. There were three. Each was carefully taped shut and marked with a small "EL" written in magic marker.

"Will and Mike boxed up your bedroom when Hop moved over here all those years ago," she continued, softer this time, as she placed her hand on El's shoulder. "Here, do you want some help?"

El watched in startled surprise as Joyce, a tiny woman in her 50s who hadn't slept in days, hefted the largest of the boxes up onto an old rickety table in the corner.

"You kept my things..." El stuttered, almost to herself. "These are my things...?"

Joyce looked up in surprise. "Of course we did."

El wasn't sure where fresh tears were coming from at this point, but there they were, running down her face, long beyond her control.

"Thank you," she mustered as she sniffed.

"Oh, you don't have to thank me, sweetie," Joyce said as she crossed back and pulled El into yet another hug. "We're just so happy you're home."

El felt herself giggle against the woman's shoulder. So much had changed, unrecognizable, altered and grown. But Joyce's embrace felt just as it always had. There was something solid within her arms. An instant grounding so abrupt that El almost reeled from the effect it had on her. Things felt simple for the moment. Quieter.

Clear.

"You..." El sniffed against her shoulder. "You married my Dad."

At that, Joyce laughed and pulled away. A blush entered her cheeks as she replied. "Yeah, I did. He's a bear, but I love him."

"I always wanted you to," El admitted happily. "I'm... I'm so happy for you."

"Oh honey, thank you," Joyce replied softly as she scanned El's face with soft eyes. "You have no idea how much we both missed you."

"I missed you, too," El sputtered. "Um... what do I call you now?" Her voice felt childlike, almost silly. But she truly didn't know the answer.

"Oh..." Joyce replied with a slight gasp. Her eyes warmed as she shrugged. "You can call me... whatever you want. Just please, not Mrs. Hopper. Not like Mike. I swear, I will never get that boy to call me Joyce."

El laughed. "Mrs. Hopper," she muttered randomly.

A moment of silence fell between them. El didn't say it aloud, but in that moment she tried it on. It wasn't the first time. The girl who was locked within the boxes behind them had tried the word on her lips hundreds of times over the course of a few years. But now, El tried it on for real. It was simply a whisper in the back of her mind. It hurt so bad and felt so good at the same time.

*Mom.*

"I – I can do this," El said as she waved her hand at the boxes. "You should get some rest. You've been up all night."

"You're sure?" Joyce asked. El nodded reassuringly. "Well, okay. I do need to sleep. I'm going to need my strength if I'm going to deal with your dad when he can't walk."

"I'll be here to help," El said easily. "Anything you need."

"You're staying?" Joyce asked hopefully. Her voice rose in anticipation with an undeniably hopeful glimmer in her eye.

The decision was as easy as breathing.

"Yeah," El said with a grateful smile. "I'm going to stay for a while. If that's okay."

---

If there was one thing that Sev was not willing to do, it was move.

Mike had found her after a few minutes of looking. She was tucked deep beneath the kitchen table. And while he hadn't asked, Mike was sure it had taken him twice the time to find her because she had been concealing herself by means of her power. Her eyes had been wide and embarrassed when he had crawled beneath the table to join her, and he had finally, after many failed minutes, given up his attempts to coax her out. Instead, there was now a Honey Bun in her hand and a glass of orange juice by her side. A perfect breakfast beneath the table.

Mike laid on his stomach as he eyed her patiently.

"So, it's too much?" he asked carefully. "Too many people?"

Sev nodded. She was finally a bit calmer and more willing to communicate now that she had something to eat. "Too much."

Mike understood. Or at least the thought he did. The constant chaos of the house was unlike anything Sev had ever experienced. At times, this ridiculous group of people made Mike feel the very same way.

"Maybe this will help?"

Mike turned to find Will crawling beneath the table beside him. In his hands he held a haphazard stack of paper and a fistful of colored pencils. Sev eyed him warily.

"Do you like to draw?" Will asked her.

"Draw?" Sev repeated slowly, her eyes wide as she tried to wrap her head around the word.

"Yeah!" Will said kindly. He dropped to his stomach and placed the materials in front of him to demonstrate. "See, you take these colored pencils and make marks on the paper like this. You can make whatever you want. Have you ever done that before?"

"...yes..." she stuttered. "I- long time ago,"

"I like to do it when I'm nervous," Will added with a smile. "It helps me calm down. Do you want to draw with me?"

Sev nodded slowly. Will slid her a sheet of paper and dropped his colored pencils in the middle of the floor between them. Mike could have hugged Will forever in that moment. Sev sat down her half eaten Honey Bun and gingerly picked up a pink pencil. She seemed to take to the activity right away, and gave the paper more and more of her attention with each passing stroke.

Mike took the moment of calm to assess the situation. And finally, a lightbulb popped on over his head.

"Hey, Sev?" Mike asked in a conspiratorial whisper. "What if we made you a really good hiding place? You could go there whenever you wanted to. It'd be your place and no one would be allowed in unless you invite them. Would that sound good?"

Sev looked at Mike with a frown of confusion.

"Hiding place?" she asked.

"Yeah," Mike confirmed. "Your own little hiding place."

She considered it for a moment, and then the tiniest smile snuck to the corners of her mouth as she nodded.

"Will, would that be okay?"

Will shrugged, lost in his own drawing for the time being. "Probably. I don't live here any more, though, so just ask Mom or Hop."

Mike nodded in understanding and wriggled out from under the table. He peeked into the kitchen to find Hopper alone at the table drinking a cup of coffee with exhausted eyes. His thick cast was jutting out so far it would be considered a fire hazard.

"Hey Hop, how you feeling?" Mike asked.

"Oh, you know," Hopper shrugged as he rolled his tired eyes. "Like a

wall fell on my leg."

Mike chuckled darkly. "You need anything?"

"Nah, I'm good," Hopper said, his voice a bit more serious this time. "Are you doing okay?"

"I'm fine," Mike replied.

"Good," Hopper said with a nod. He took a sip of coffee as he eyed Mike in silence. He sighed, almost as if he was making an acquiescence. "You did a good job, kid. I gotta thank you for that. You didn't listen to a damn word I said, but... I'm grateful for it."

Mike snickered, but the thanks did not go unnoticed. He felt his cheeks redden as he replied. "You know I'm not good at taking directions."

"And thank God for that," Hopper replied. "You did good."

"Thank you, Hop," Mike said, seriously this time. His mind jogged back to his original topic in a desperate attempt to cut the awkward overwhelm that was suddenly filling his chest. "Hey, how often do you guys use the dining room table?"

Hopper snorted. "Thanksgiving and Christmas. Why?"

"Okay. Would it, um... Would you guys be okay if it was off limits for awhile?"

"I wouldn't notice at all," Hopper replied as he shook his head. "Knock yourself out."

"Okay, great." Mike said as he swallowed against the lump that had materialized in his throat. "Thanks."

It took twenty minutes, five sheets, three blankets, four pillows, and one set of old string lights from the half dressed Christmas tree in the corner of the living room, but once it was complete, Sev's blanket fort beneath the dining room table was simply perfection. Mike had to crunch down onto his elbows in order to fit while sitting, but it was worth it as he noted Sev's instant mood shift within the solitude that

the enclosure sheets provided.

"See, it's like your own little home," he said as he waved his hand around.

Sev looked at him curiously. "Home?" she repeated.

"Oh yeah. Home is like..." he considered his words for a moment. "Home is where you feel safe. And it's filled with people you like. It's cozy and feels good and it can make you happy. You can come out whenever you want, but if you want to hide and feel safe you can just slip back in here."

Sev smiled fully this time. She nodded and flopped down onto her side with the casual nature of a child, burrowing her body into the pillows all the while. "Thank you. This is good. I like home."

"No problem," Mike replied easily. "Do you want to be alone now?"

She considered for a moment but ultimately shook her head. "No. Stay. Draw?" she asked as she offered him a green colored pencil.

Her eyes were big and soft as she waited for him to accept. Mike felt a weight lift from his own chest as he saw the lack of weight in her eyes, for possibly the first time since he had met her.

"Sure," he said as he took the pencil and shifted to join the tiny chestnut haired girl on the floor. "We can draw."

---

El stared blankly at the boxes for a very long time. It was jarring, the knowledge that her past life was gathered up inside of three nondescript cardboard cubes, like a foggy mirror to a past life. The box cutter that had been placed on top of them beckoned a silent invitation.

Footsteps creaked on the old wood behind her. Ripped from her thoughts, El jumped and spun around, only to find Kali in her wake.

"I should've known you'd still be jumpy," Kali said as she pushed her hair out of her eyes and pulled her elbows in tight against her chest to warm herself in the cold. "Sorry I didn't warn you."



"It's okay," El replied as she reached out and pulled her sister close to her. Her eyes ravenously scanned Kali's features, searching for anything out of place. But miraculously, her sister seemed to be in better condition than her. "They didn't take your hair..." El choked out quietly, "I was worried they'd-"

Kali scoffed. "You think I would have let them do *that*? Any asshole who tried would have been dead. Hell, the assholes who didn't try are dead anyway."

El laughed weakly, but it instantly shifted to a fresh wave of tears. "I'm so sorry, Kali."

"Shhh. It's okay," Kali replied as she ran her hand over El's back.

"I was so scared for you," El whispered as she hiccupped against tears. "I tried to come after you right away, but I was too weak. I killed a few of those guys and had to pull some crazy moves for us to escape the apartment. Mike stopped me from going to the lab right away."

"It's good that he did," Kali said reassuringly. "That place was crawling with security for the first two days. They were in and out of my room constantly. It was a nightmare. Not that I remember much of it," she added with annoyance. "They had me drugged most of the time. But... you wouldn't have made it in. *Especially* not if you weren't at full strength. I don't even know where the security was when you guys came, but when we were moving through the building it was almost deserted."

At that, El couldn't help but smile. "Mike. He, uh... he hacked their systems and messed with their clocks and their schedules and stuff, and he put the doors on full security lockdown to limit how many people could get inside at shift change."

"Damn, that boy is useful," Kali replied with a low whistle. "I swear, the shit he can do? It's like he has his own kind of power..."

"Right?!" El exclaimed with a silly sounding giggle. "He's-"

"- Are you going to tell me about how he's perfect and amazing and you love him?" Kali teased with a deadpan voice. "Because you can

spare me. I've heard it all before."

And at that, El felt her cheeks heat as she averted her eyes down to her socked feet. "Yeah... probably."

"Well, I believe you now, if that means anything to you," Kali replied jokingly.

"Finally," El replied dramatically. "And..." El bit her lip, suddenly hesitant for how Kali would react. But there was no way she could let it go. "What the hell was that with Steve?"

"What?!" Kali replied with instant defensiveness. "He just offered me a place to stay."

"No," El challenged. "He asked you on a date tonight with a guarantee that you're going to go back to his place."

"Oh please," Kali rolled her eyes. "That guy is an idiot. You missed it, but we were at each other's throats from the moment we met. He is stubborn as hell. Plus," she added flippantly as she lowered her voice. "You know I don't usually go for men."

It was El's turn to roll her eyes. "Yeah, not *usually*."

At that, Kali bit her lip. "I will say.." she conceded. "...that it was pretty interesting that he didn't fall for any of my illusions."

"He didn't?" El asked in surprise.

"Nope," she said as she shook her head. "He called them *weak*. Can you believe that?" Kali snickered. "But believe me, I'm taking him up on his offer only because this house is crawling with so many people that I'm about to jump out of my skin. He offered me my own room and all of his hot water and food. How can I turn that down?"

"You can't," El agreed with a shrug.

"What are in the boxes?" Kali asked suddenly as she nodded to the floor.

El eyed her sister with amusement. "Are you trying to change the

subject?"

Kali eyed El back with abject annoyance. "Yes."

El laughed out loud at that, but returned her eyes to the oddly uncomfortable topic at hand. "They're my old things. They... they kept my things."

"Oh wow," Kali said with a small gasp.

El knew that she didn't need to explain the meaning or the weight of this kindness to Kali. Kali slipped her arm around El's shoulder and pulled her into her side. "Well, it took us seven years, but you got your wish," she whispered, her voice deliberately light in El's ear. "You definitely made it home."

"Yeah," El replied through a growing lump in her throat. "Ever think *you'd* end up in Hawkins?"

"Oh, hell no. Not in a million years," Kali chuckled sarcastically. "They're nice, though. I uh... I see why this was hard to leave."

"Yeah..." El said quietly as she stared at the boxes.

"Do you want to open them?" Kali asked. "I can help."

And at that, El considered them once again. She pulled her sister a little more tightly to her side.

"That'd be great."

It didn't take long, considering there were only three boxes, but it was truly a jump back in time. El almost felt as though she could smell the cabin deep within the weaves of her old clothes. It hit her with a myriad of emotions that she simply did not have the energy to process. It was useful from a functional perspective to suddenly have her old wardrobe back, given that El hadn't really grown much since she'd been sixteen. But there were little things. Pictures, notes passed around from school, and old homework assignments with A's in math and D's in English, that told her a hard to swallow story of the girl she'd once been.

It wasn't as overwhelming as she would have expected, however, until she came upon a tiny black velvet box.

El became supremely aware of the chain around her neck as her fingers, trembling both from the cold and the memory, plucked the box from where it had been hidden for so many years. She turned it over in her fingers with a sense of disbelief. The night Mike gave her the ring had been the first time she'd ever felt velvet. She had loved it so much, and was so mesmerized by the sensation of the material against her fingers, that she'd had the hardest time deciding if she loved the box or the ring more. The ring clearly won out. But the box? Truth be told, El had always cursed herself for accidentally leaving it behind.

There was nothing special about it, exactly. It was a simple jeweler's box with a hinge and a soft bed for her ring, but the deep red velvet that cased the interior had been something she'd spent hours running her fingers over in the final months before she'd left. Mike had always been perplexed by her love for it, and she'd never truly been able to explain. It was just that... the fact that something so beautiful like the ring could be cased in something *else* so beautiful? It had always given her an odd surge of hope.

El knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that nothing in these boxes would be more meaningful to her than this.

"I'm freezing. Can we please take these inside?" Kali complained. "I mean, what are we doing? We're finally at a place with reliable heat for the first time in... ever? And we're choosing to spend hours in the one room that's not insulated. We're idiots."

El laughed. "Yeah, we can go in. Leave them here. I'll deal with these later."

El pocketed the ring box in her jeans and followed her sister as she quickly darted back into the warmth of the kitchen.

She was surprised to find it empty.

The house sounded almost silent. It was deserted in a way that was so very opposite from how she had left it just a short time before. She

stepped further into the house with a growing curiosity, and out of the corner of her eye she spied lights. Multi colored, shadowed, and twinkling. The dining room table was no longer visible. Instead, it was shrouded in mismatched sheets. Little pinprick lights shined through. Mike's socked feet stuck out from beneath.

El's heart leapt dangerously.

"Smart," Kali said quietly as she stepped forward toward the newly constructed blanket fort.

"What?" El asked.

"Sev. If you think I've been overwhelmed being here, you haven't seen her. This place has completely freaked her out."

El frowned as she crawled onto her knees and knocked on the table leg.

"Ask who it is," she heard Mike whisper.

"Who... who is it?" Sev's voice echoed tentatively.

"It's El and Kali," El replied.

"Do you want to let them in?" Mike whispered.

There was a long pause before he spoke again. "Well, you have to tell them, then."

"...Come in."

At that, Mike pulled back the sheet to reveal the spacious pillow fort within. Rainbow Christmas lights lit the place up with little glimmers of color. Pillows and blankets were piled thick on the floor. Art supplies were strewn around the two occupants, one so small and one too big, both with their eyes on her.

El smiled at Mike as a bubbling nostalgia filtered through her veins, but it was short lived as she shifted her gaze to Sev.

Sev's eyes were wide, nervous... and exactly like her father's.

With a sickening shock, El felt a screaming hand of fear slice through her body. The terror that had simmered to the edges of her mind throughout the morning shot back so hard that she almost fell over off of her knees. In was instant she was there, frozen on a cold floor, a thousand miles away.

She took no time to think as her eyes quickly darted back to Mike. "I'm going to take a shower and go back to bed." Her words fell from her in a stilted rush, but there was not very much she could do about it.

"Okay?" Mike replied as his eyebrow arched curiously. "We're just drawing. Sev's going to sleep in here. She likes the privacy. We're sleeping in Jonathan's room now since Will needs his room back."

"Okay, sure" El confirmed quickly. "Well, I'm gonna – "

"El?"

Sev's voice was so soft that El hardly heard her. It took El everything she had to look back in the girl's direction.

Sev's lip trembled as a grateful smile rose to her face. "Thank you," she said timidly.

El stared at the girl in silence, unsure of what she meant, unsure if she could move. But before she could attempt to figure it out, Sev had returned to her drawing.

---

The days had passed in sleepy hazes and short stretches of clarity, and El found that whenever she allowed her self to rest, she fell into an almost coma-like sleep. Full days had disappeared once the house had calmed down a bit. And in her brief waking hours, El had found solace in the simplicity. In watching tiny bits of TV with her dad. In drinking coffee on the cold front porch with Max and Lucas during their daily afternoon visits. In listening to the radio as she organized her old things in Jonathan's bedroom. In watching Mike and Will play video games, and chatting with Joyce over holiday snacks at the kitchen table. It was all so very lovely, sprinkled between the deepest spells of rest, a sleep too deep for dreams or the inevitable

nightmares that she knew were yet to come.

There was only one thing she was trying to avoid. Sev.

It was an odd sensation, looking at a ten year old girl and feeling like you might die. But no matter how silly it might have felt, El couldn't quite shake it. It was a shock to her that she hadn't noticed the resemblance from the very beginning. One's ice blue eyes, though she had only known them through the Void, had haunted El's nightmares since she'd been sixteen. To see them, after so much, within the face of a child... a child who El knew had the power to kill her?

Needless to say, it was a lot.

She tried to talk herself down. To rationalize and put it to the side. But it had a hold on her.

And it was growing increasingly difficult, because Sev was continuing to seek her out. Not a day had gone by without the small girl appearing at El's side when she had least expected it, and making her jump clean out of her skin. Each time, the girl looked desperately nervous, as though she had had to work up courage to find her. Her voice had been squeaky and small as she had asked to show El her fort or her drawings. And each time, with a growing level of embarrassed shame, El had found a way to duck away.

So, when El found herself, slightly intoxicated, hiding from a New Years Eve party in full swing in the living room, digging through her old clothing box on the back porch in desperate search for a clean warm sweater, she was, in a way, prepared for what was about to come.

The New Years party had been plugging along since the late afternoon. What had first started as an afternoon of Scrabble with Kali had slowly turned into a full event, complete with all of her friends and cameos from her Dad and Joyce. It had been incredibly nice, but El wasn't going to lie to herself. It was overwhelming.

Everywhere she turned there was another question. Well intentioned, caring, but not one that she wanted to answer. Where had she been? What had she been doing all these years? What were her plans now

that she could actually think about making them... for the first time in her life? And El? El didn't really have any answers. Because, while it sounded like an adventure to outside eyes, being on the run for years was actually a pretty boring and depressing tale. Filled with endless cold nights, years of uncertainty, and more loss than she had ever wanted to face.

Not party chatter, to say the least.

Max's laugh erupted from the living room as El listened to their voices at a distance and smiled sadly.

It was a truly stunning experience, to be back here. Seeing her friends... Dustin's smile and Max's eyes and Lucas's hugs and Will's kind acceptance... it was almost too good to believe.

Yet, it was bittersweet in a way. She could see in their features how much time had passed. She could almost sense the collective memories they shared. They hung wordlessly in the air around them, inaccessible to her. Yet, whatever level of ennui it elicited, she could handle it. For, somehow, she was lucky enough to simply *be here again*.

She was lucky to be home.

El took a drink of her beer as she eyed the pile of clothing in front of her, but before she could make a move to rummage through them, she froze. A familiar electric presence filled the air as a creak sounded from the doorway.

El turned to her left to find Sev standing quietly by the door. Her blue eyes glowed in the moonlight. On reflex, El stretched her fingers in order to feel them move.

"Hi..." El said quietly.

Sev, as had become the pattern, seemed just as anxious as El. "Loud," she murmured with a sour face as she nodded toward the inside.

"It is loud," El stuttered lamely.

Sev nervously rang the too long sleeves of her shirt within her fingers



as she nodded. "Draw?" she whispered suddenly.

"What?"

Sev pointed back inside. "Draw? With me?"

El's body flamed with discomfort. She filtered through a million possible reasons to say no... but she knew she was caught hiding from the party just as Sev had been doing as well. There was no good reason to say no.

This was really not her night.

"Okay." El steeled herself and nodded.

"Oh!" Sev almost jumped as a wide smile of surprise burst onto her face. A hopeful gleam sparkled in her eye. It all caught El completely off guard.

Sev scrambled backwards and quickly disappeared back through the doorway.

El followed hesitantly.

The sounds of the party, voices, laughter and music, all amped up as they entered the kitchen. She could hear Dustin explaining, in excited detail, the difference in digestive cycles between male and female apes. El could admit, that even drawing with Sev sounded more exciting than the 'party' talk going on in the other room.

Sev led the way into the dining room, and as they entered, the lights of the blanket fort lit up in an instant. El knew for a fact that it wasn't because they were being plugged in by hand. The small girl slipped to the floor, pulled back the sheet, and El followed. El took a seat in the corner closest to the makeshift door as her eyes wandered around the space. She had to admire Mike's handiwork. The string of Christmas lights had been strung through the top of the table, crisscrossing through the beams and legs to create a cozy and festive ambiance beneath the sheets. In the far corner, near Sev's pillows, was a small stack of colored pencils and paper.

"Look," Sev said excitedly as she pointed to the top of the table. El

followed Sev's finger to find a set of neatly taped pieces of paper. Their geometric designs were laid out and organized into lovely mosaics of color.

"Did you do these?" El asked tentatively.

"Yes?" Sev replied.

Deep colors were traced across each page. They lined up, creating an intricate design that spanned the many sheets of paper.

"They're... really pretty." El said with impressed surprise.

When El looked back at Sev, she found that the girl was smiling gratefully. Her cheeks were tinged pink from the compliment.

Maybe it was the girl's smile and excitement, or maybe it was just El's buzzy intoxication, but El felt something shift slightly against her stubborn avoidance.

"Do you like drawing?" El asked, with a little more confidence than before.

Sev nodded with a vigor that she found surprising. "My favorite." She replied.

At that, Sev leaned back against the far table leg and bundled her knees beneath the long sleeved tee that El was sure had once been Jonathan's. Her thin arms made the material hang so long that her hands were almost hidden beneath the sleeves. Sev leaned down, pulled up a fresh sheet of paper and handed it to El.

"Thanks..." El replied as she took it from the girl's hands.

Suddenly, El saw something rise in her periphery. She jumped, instantly on edge, but it was just a large book, floating slowly. Sev dropped it ever so softly into El's lap as she explained, "to draw on."

"Right..." El replied tentatively. "Thanks."

Sev nodded as she leaned forward and reached for the paper and clipboard she had been drawing on before.

El began to sketch without any semblance of talent as she listened to the tones of the room off in the distance. It was nice. The tones of friends. The clink of glasses. The blare of shitty music. And slowly, her eyes then fell on Sev's hand strokes. She watched the girl get lost in the process. In the moment of it all. In the simple movement of her hand and the knitting of her brow as she decided upon the next color, and as her tiny shoulders moved to the drumbeat of the music in the other room.

Just like a kid.

"Do you like music?" El asked Sev suddenly, surprised when the question left her lips.

"Music..." Sev repeated inquisitively without looking up from her drawing.

"Yeah, music," El replied curiously. But then she remember, with a jolt of pain, that she too had never really heard it until she had escaped the lab. "With the..." El tapped on her book to the beat of the song that played from the other room. "With the beat?"

"I don't know...music," Sev replied innocently as she held out color options for El. "But... I like it."

"Well, there's better music than this," El said offhandedly as she took a green.

"You like music?" Sev asked.

"I love music," El replied. "I love it about as much as you love drawing."

"Oh," Sev said. "I love drawing a lot."

"I can tell," El replied as she eyed the makeshift ceiling. "I don't really like *this* music though." And at that, El felt a secret smile creep to her lips.

Sev seemed to feel it in the air, because she looked up right as El pushed her force. Loud static filled the house as the channel changed to next channel and to next channel and to the next until it stopped

on the alt rock station out of Indianapolis that El had always loved so much.

"What the hell!?" Steve cried from the other room. Sev's eyes went wide then, clearly in on the joke. She began to giggle incessantly as the party seemed to become completely interrupted.

"I told you El wasn't going to listen to your shitty Top 40 radio all night, but you didn't listen me," El heard Kali interject flippantly.

"I can't even turn the knob!" Steve groaned.

Sev giggled harder, and El found herself, to her surprise, throwing the girl a genuine smile.

"Because she doesn't want you to!" Kali replied with a tone that clearly came with a matching eye roll.

And, almost as a reward, The Lemonhead's 'Into Your Arms' filled the room.

"Oh! Leave it!" Max cried suddenly, "I love this song!"

"*This* is good music," El said as Sev giggled.

The girl's toothy grin was apparent under the glittering lights of their tiny hideaway. And as she laughed her eyes shimmered with something soft, making the piercing blue hue look less like ice and much more like tranquil water.

"I like this music," Sev said as she looked back down and began to draw with a vibrant purple.

The lyrics wafted into El's consciousness as she watched the girl draw. It was one of her most recent favorite songs, but in the rainbow light of the custom Mike-built fort with the tiny world buzzing around her, the words took on a new meaning.

Sev seemed so small as she curled into the far corner beneath the emanating Christmas lights. There was no sign of her immense dark power as she drew thick lines, color after color after color. There was no sign that she was anything more than a sweet, innocent kid. El

knew the truth, of course. She knew the dangerous level of trust it would take to see her that way. Yet, as El drew on Will's paper, in the fort Mike made, in the home Hopper and Joyce had opened to her once again, she realized with a jolt of shame that she didn't know where she'd be in the world without the people who had given that very same level trust to her...

El could give it, too.

For yes, the girl was powerful, and a direct line to the man who had almost taken her life, but she herself had never shown true malice. In fact, she'd shown the opposite... she'd saved Mike.

Sev seemed to sense El's attention at that moment, because her eyes slowly raised from the paper. The small girl bit her lip, more specifically nervous than she had been in anytime in the last days. It put El on instant edge, but she forced herself to breathe through it rather than look away.

"Can I try..." Sev started, but her voice wavered and trailed off.

"Can you try what?" El asked curiously.

Sev scratched her head as she seemed to look for the words. "Can I try..." she repeated slowly. "to talk?"

"You... are talking," El replied with confusion.

"No..." Sev replied as she worked through her thoughts. "With you?"

"You are?" El repeated.

"No... the *special* way," Sev said suddenly. "Like you did back there."

And El had to admit that she had absolutely no idea what the hell Sev was talking about.

But she didn't have time to ask, because in that moment a tiny bursting sensation flooded El's mind and she shuddered all the way down to her toes as a tiny voice spoke... from within her.

*Can you hear?*

El stared agape at Sev, stock still for a moment. Cold sweat was instant on the back of her neck. She thought the word, and it seemed to project.

Yes.

And then, Sev smiled so incredibly softly that it scrambled El's senses altogether.

*You talked like this.* Sev said. *Back there. To me. To help you. Remember?*

*I talked like **this**?* El asked with surprise. She searched her hazy brain and found a tattered memory. *How?*

*Don't know.* Sev said with a shrug. *It's new.*

El gaped at Sev in surprise. *You've never done this before?*

Sev shook her head no.

El stuttered, in her mind. *...I've never done this before either.*

Sev looked back down at her drawing as she spoke, but her lips still did not move. *Can't with Mike. Can't with Kali. Only you. I can say more here. Words are easier.*

El watched the girl with compounding shock as the sensation tickled over the folds of her brain, and she found, to her utmost surprise, that a lodged piece of her fear flipped over to reveal an oddly unexplainable excitement.

*Do you want me to talk to you like this now?* El asked.

Sev shrugged. *Maybe?*

*Okay.*

Sev was quiet then, in every way, for a moment. But she didn't seem resolved.

*Are you okay?* El found herself thinking as she pushed the thought in

Sev's direction.

Sev chewed on a pencil thoughtfully. She glanced up shyly. The blue of her eyes danced with yet another nervous question.

*What's now?* she finally asked. *For me?*

El didn't need Sev to elaborate. She could read the entire question in the girl's expression. El smiled as warmly as she could.

*More of this, I guess. Drawing. Learning. School maybe? Normal kid stuff. Not like before.*

An urgency entered Sev's expression with an instant snap.

*With you?* She asked. *And Mike?*

El paused as her heart skipped in her chest. *Is...is that what you want?*

Sev nodded intently as her eyes began to glisten wet like deep clear pools.

And in that moment, El's fear simply melted for good.

With one of the largest promises that she had ever made, El nodded. It was a choice, not a necessity. But when she thought about it in its full truth, there was really no other way. If there was anyone who could help this girl, El knew it was her.

They were so very similar, after all.

El took a deep shaky breath as she gathered her nerves to reply, though she didn't need the air to speak.

*Then, yes. With us.*

Sev's smile simply radiated in reply.

*You're good.* Sev said as her tears began to twinkle upon her lashes. *Papa was bad. Father was bad. Uncles were... bad. But you... you're good. Thank you.*

*You're good, too.* El said with a growing smile, more honest and real

than El had ever been able to be with Sev before. *You saved Mike. Thank **you**.*

At that, Sev shot El the toothiest giggliest smile. She nodded happily.

*Mike. Mike is good too. Really good. Mike made me a home.*

*A home?* El asked suddenly.

Sev nodded as she vaguely waved her hand around the blanket fort.

*Oh.* El replied. *He made one for me, when we were kids.*

Sev's eyes became wide saucers of excitement at El's words. *Mike made **you** a home?*

*Yeah.* El said with the most genuine smile she had felt all day. *He made me a home.*

The sounds of the party faded from El's mind as she watched the girl return to her drawing. She was calm and quiet as she carefully chose her colors and continued her increasingly intricate geometric patterns. It was mesmerizing to watch, and with it El felt a calm crest over her that this girl, this girl who was just like her, dangerous and vulnerable in equally intense measure, had somehow seemed to create.

Slowly, as the moments passed, Sev's hand began to move more lazily. Finally, her pencil slipped from her fingers and her cheek laid upon her paper as her lashes closed. With a sense of care, El reached across the length of the fort to where Sev laid asleep. She collected the pencils, shimmied the paper from under the girl's cheek, and pulled a blanket from the side over the small girl's body.

She took in the girl's sleeping face as she checked in with the promise that she had made. And, to her immense shock, she found herself smiling.

El leaned back and attempted to unfold her locked legs, but before she could fully move, there was a tiny knock at the table leg.

"She's asleep," El whispered.



And, with a look of surprise, Mike's face popped through the sheets and into view.

---

Two weeks ago, Mike Wheeler had woken up in a cold sweat under an old quilt in a drafty concrete loft. The tears in his eyes had come directly from his subconscious, and they fell against his cheeks as his girlfriend shook him roughly in the dark. Her voice had been exhausted as she'd growled into her pillow and begged him to stop yelling in his sleep.

'Eleven' was fresh on his tongue, for the fourteenth night in a row.

*Alone* wasn't exactly the sensation he had felt during those many nights. It was deeper than that. More painful. Harder to breathe through. *Displaced*. That might have been a better word for it. It felt as though he had begun to wake up in a place that he didn't belong. Foreign walls. Unfamiliar smells. The touch of someone who could have been a stranger at his side. Yet, when he questioned what that feeling might have meant, he couldn't come up with an answer.

It was torturous.

However, as much as Mike had wanted the dreams of El to stop, he couldn't deny that in the back of his mind he yearned for them as well. Because she'd appeared more vibrantly with each passing night. The timber of her voice. The exact shine of her eyes. The way she would giggle when he would kiss her cheek. Each little puzzle piece of her, long lost to time, had resurfaced with perfect clarity like some kind of unexplainable dark magic.

*Or so he had thought.*

Mike stared at El intently where she sat beneath the rainbow lights inside of the blanket fort. She was dressed in a rolled up blue flannel that she had dug out of her old things. It was tied at the waist in an attempt to make it festive. It was a look that, yet again, made her exude a level of cool that almost felt unattainable for Mike. Her oversized sleeves were bunched up at her elbows. Her hair fell into clean waves down her back, revealing the soft curve of her neck. She smiled at him calmly from where she sat at the back of fort.

He had been so wrong. Those dreams of her? They had been nothing more than a shadow. Dull and grey. Nowhere near the real thing at all.

She was absolutely beautiful.

The voices of his oldest friends echoed from the party in the other room, and in its midst, with his eyes on the El, Mike felt *rooted*. The nebulous displacement that had owned his heart for those many nights, many weeks, months and years, was simply washed away.

He was home.

*She* was home.

And that life he had left so abruptly behind felt like it had never been his at all.

"Not in the mood for a party?" he asked in a hushed whisper as he crawled beneath the sheet and joined her in the tight quarters of her side of the blanket fort. Sev was curled up asleep beneath the leaf on the far end, leaving just enough space for him to cram in beside El.

"You could say that," she replied.

Mike smiled as he handed her a fresh beer can. She took it gratefully.

"Why are you avoiding the party?" he asked.

El sighed. "Do happy people ever make you feel worse when you're just not in the mood?"

Mike laughed darkly as he pulled himself closer to her. "And you feel guilty because there's no real way to tell people they're being too happy, so you hide every second you can?"

El looked up in surprise. "Exactly."

Mike shrugged. "That's my entire story of college," he said simply.

El relaxed as she smiled slightly. Her fingers crept up to the ring at the end of the chain around her neck and began to twirl it

absentmindedly in the silence.

"Why are you sad?" he finally asked.

"I'm not sad," she replied thoughtfully. "Just... overwhelmed."

"Yeah?" he asked.

El nodded. "This is just... everyone here. *Everything* here?" she added as she waved her hand vaguely. "It's amazing. It's just... a lot."

Mike rubbed his hand reassuringly against her thigh. "I get it," he said quietly. "There's been a lot of changes lately."

"Right," she replied gratefully. "For you, too."

"Oh, not so much for me," Mike said with a teasing sideways glance. "I just threw away my job, my apartment, my boring girlfriend. Nothing of much importance."

El gasped as a shocked giggle escaped her. "You liked your old life that much, huh?"

"El," Mike stated with deadpan honesty, one beer too far in for him to succeed at screening his words. "I would have traded it all in in a second for this. Hell, I *did* trade it all in in a second for this. Honestly, I broke up with my girlfriend the second I thought you might walk in the door."

"Mike..." El breathed as she covered her mouth to stop her nervous laugh from waking up Sev.

"Sorry," Mike whispered, suddenly aware of himself. He pulled the beer from El's hand and took a drink. "I'm... I might have had a bit too much to drink."

El laughed. "It's okay. I um... I like the honesty."

Mike glanced toward her with an embarrassed grin. "Maybe I should change the subject before I say anything stupid." Mike looked around the blanket fort thoughtfully. "I have to say I'm surprised to find you in here, considering you've avoided Sev like the plague."

El scoffed. "I have not"

Mike stared at her with flat eyes. "Really?"

"Okay, fine," she whispered as the slightest tinge of pink peppered her cheeks. "But I'm done doing that."

"Good," Mike replied with a smile. "Because Sev is awesome."

"Yeah..." El replied quietly. Mike watched her eyes dart to the girl for a moment. She seemed to consider her words before she looked back to Mike. And when she did, she leaned as close to him as she could and dropped her voice to the lightest whisper.

"What?" Mike asked before she could even speak.

"She can... or *I* can? I guess I did it first, in the lab. She can talk to me... without talking."

"Whoa, what?!" Mike exclaimed. El's eyes went wide as she frantically gestured for him to be quiet. "Sorry," he whispered as he bent in even closer. "Just... that's really *really* cool. Is it like mind reading or telepathy?"

El gave it a thought for a moment. "I think it's just telepathy."

Mike snorted. "*Just* telepathy."

"Yes, *just* telepathy," El teased in reply. She bit her lip, a little more serious. Mike noticed her fingers fumble and hold on tight to the ring around her neck. "So... um... you'll live in a very quiet place when we all move in together."

And at that, Mike almost choked on his beer. "Come again?"

El seemed shy as she stumbled over her words. "She asked what was next... and I told her she could come with us. You know, if we go to... San Francisco or something?"

"Oh," was all Mike could manage to utter as everything in his body seemed to buzz.

"Is that... Is that okay?" El asked with sudden hesitation.

Mike lamely nodded with an incessant manner that he was sure made him look like an idiot. But he couldn't help it. El Hopper was sitting in front of him, looking absolutely gorgeous, telling him of plans *she* was making about moving across the country... *with him*. "Of course that's okay. That's... that's perfect," He stuttered.

"Good," El whispered with a sense of relief, as her fingers slightly loosened their grip on her necklace.

It was then that Mike remembered his own half-formed haphazard plan, and scooted closer to her.

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"You hold onto that a lot," Mike observed quietly as he shifted closer to her.

"What?" she asked in surprise as she worked to steady her breath.

"The ring. Did you know you do that?" Mike hushed his voice even further as he brought his lips close to her ear. "You grasp it. Sometimes through your shirt. I've – I've seen you doing it the last few days...I think I saw you doing it back at my apartment."

El looked down to find her fingers clinging onto the ring around her neck. She hadn't been aware of her motions, but she couldn't have been surprised.

"I... um..." she stuttered as embarrassed heat began to rise to her cheeks. "Yes. I know. I always have. It's a habit, I guess."

"Why?"

"Why what?" she asked over her shoulder.

Mike's face was so close that they were sharing the same air. His eyes twinkled with just the slightest bit of intoxication, which had left his lips turned up in a semi-permanent grin. "Do you know why you hold it?" he elaborated.

El looked down at her fingers as they continued to move the ring. It

was odd, how quickly her heart was beating. "It... it makes me feel safe, I guess?" She blushed at what felt like a silly secret. But, when she looked back up, and saw the slightest welcoming smile on Mike's lips, she lost the urge to hide. "It's always helped me feel a little more okay," she said with a simple shrug.

Mike smiled bashfully at her words. "Can I..." he asked as he reached out and grazed his fingers against hers. El loosened her grip on the ring and Mike carefully took it into his own hand. The rainbow tones of the lights bounced off the tiny diamond as he brought it up to his face and inspected it in silence.

"I was so nervous when I gave you this," he whispered thoughtfully, lost in his own thoughts. His eyes grazed up to hers as he smiled with boyish embarrassment and rolled his eyes in a self deprecating manner. "I had this whole speech prepared about how I wanted to get you a diamond because... you were like a diamond. Or something like that? It was this whole dorky science analogy I had worked out. I think I rehearsed something like 20 times in the mirror, but when I gave it to you I just choked and said something like 'it's pretty... like you.'"

El pulled her lip between her teeth as she felt her face erupt into a smile. "What was the speech?" she asked quietly.

"Oh god, it's embarrassing." Mike groaned as he laughed at himself. "It was something like – " Mike's voice quietly shifted to the mocking tone of a teenager. "Diamonds are the hardest and strongest material in nature, they can withstand anything, just like you. But, they're also so beautiful and they reflect light and... and you're so beautiful and you reflect light and..." he trailed off as he laughed at himself. "Yeah... it was something like that."

El felt a bubbly giggle charge in her chest. "That's the sweetest nerdiest thing I've ever heard."

"I told you," he said with a self loathing shrug. "I was such a dork."

"I loved it," El assured him before a teasing glint fought its way to her smile. "And you're still a dork."

Mike shrugged without fighting her and bit his lip as he laughed at himself. All the while, he twirled the ring between his fingers. The casual chatter from the party bled into the backdrop as Mike fell silent and met her gaze. His fingers stopped moving against the ring as the the dancing lightness in his expression simmered to something deep.

Something unexplainable shifted in the air, and it made El's heart flutter in a way that she had been wholly unprepared for.

Mike licked his lips nervously before he finally spoke.

"Would you, um... would you ever want to put it back on your finger?" he asked quietly.

El's breath caught in her throat.

"Yes," she whispered.

Mike smiled softly in the heavy silence. He looked at her for a moment, his eyes glittering with the rainbow lights, before he took a deep breath and let his gaze drop to his hands. His fingers, slow and methodical, began to move up the chain in his grasp. The cold metal slid across El's neck in a way that made her shiver breathlessly. Finally, he found the clasp. His fingers slowly worked it free, grazing the skin at the base of her throat as he did so. They felt jittery and nervous, but she didn't mind. It was a quality that perfectly matched the unexpected fluttering of her heart. After what felt like eternity, El felt the silver chain slip from her body for the first time in years. It fell into a coil in Mike's palm. She watched with rapt attention as he delicately removed the ring from the chain.

And then suddenly, with a secret smile and a fumbling limbs, Mike reached into his pocket and turned his back to her.

And when he turned back around, the ring that had been around her neck for so many years was presented to her in a delicate black velvet box that she knew so very well. Just as it had been before.

"What is this?" El asked breathlessly.

"It's... It's a recommitment to a promise," Mike replied firmly, his

cheeks reddening deeper by the second. "I found the box in our room and I thought... I don't know, it's stupid maybe..."

"No," El said suddenly as she reached out for his hand. "It's not stupid at all."

"It's just..." Mike hands shook the box as he held it up in offering. When he finally found the words, his eyes zeroed in on hers with deep and earnest intensity. He took a deep breath. "El, I just know that I've tried to do this... this whole living thing... without you and... it wasn't at all what I wanted. I hated it. I'll admit it. Even when I told myself I didn't hate it I knew I hated it and... I'm rambling." He shook his head and drew in a deep breath. "I just... I'm just really happy that whatever comes next... it's going to be with you."

"10! 9!"

El and Mike both jumped as the party rang out in a chorus, but neither of them made a single move to leave.

"8! 7!"

El was speechless. Words did not want to form on her tongue. So instead, she simply nodded as she offered up her shaky right hand.

"7! 6!"

Mike seemed to remember the exact finger that he had put the ring on originally, so many years before. His fingers were gentle as they slid the ring down to where it sat at a perfect fit.

"5!"

"There..." he whispered as his eyes glided back to hers.

"4!"

El let herself go into the depths of Mike's eyes as the voices of the people she loved counted away the past and beckoned them into future.



"3! 2! 1!"

"HAPPY NEW YEAR!"

And then, without warning, Mike broke out into the most dazzling smile.

"El?" he whispered as he leaned in so very close to her lips.

"Yes?"

Mike dropped the softest kiss upon her. He dropped his forehead against hers and closed his eyes. "I'm happy you're home."

"Me too," El sighed before she inched forward in search of his kiss once again.

Sometimes the most important moments are masked. Hidden behind anxiety or overwhelm, trauma, insecurity, or the unknown. They catch you by surprise and are only truly clear in the rearview of time.

That moment, as cheers welcomed in the year, and as Mike's lips moved with hers under the rainbow lights of a blanket fort, El was aware of that. She knew without a shadow of a doubt that she would remember this moment with more gravity, more meaning, and more gratefulness with each passing year. She knew, because it wasn't the first time. It had always been that way for her. Shimmering glittering moments of beauty had sewn themselves one by one into the dark fabric of her life, like stars in a night sky. And almost every single shimmer seemed to center around the boy who held her, once again, after so long, in his arms.

In this newest shimmering moment, lost in Mike's touch, El felt the beginning of something *new*. She didn't quite know what it was, but she knew one thing to be true:

Whatever came next... it would be with him.

## Notes for the Chapter:

I cannot express how deep my thanks are that you have read this tale. Please let me know your thoughts in the comments below, or on tumblr @dancingskygreen. I'd love to answer questions and tell you more about these characters who have stitched their way deeply into my heart over the months that I have been completely lost in writing this.

I want to thank you all so much for your AMAZING support while I've worked through this. It's been insanely humbling and rewarding. I'm not going to forget this one easily. It's honestly, probably my favorite thing I've ever written in my life.

Stay tuned because sometime soon I will start adding chapters to my next Milevenstory, The Jump. (Chapter 1 can be found in my profile).

Did I mention I love all of you? BECAUSE I LOVE ALL OF YOU!

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